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QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION : AN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY OF CURRENT PRACTICE AND LESSONS FOR SOUTH AFRICA

A minor dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Educational Administration, Planning and Social Policy.

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ABSTRACT

Quality has been one of the most talked about issues in higher education in the last fifteen years. Concerns about the quality of higher education have been directed predominantly at publicly-funded institutions which have been required increasingly, in the last decade, to do more with less and expected, simultaneously, to provide assurance that the quality of educational provision is not being compromised. Quality assurance systems, established to measure and assess the quality of higher education institutions and programmes, have become a global trend. This movement, which began in Europe and the United States in the early to mid-1980s, has spread to many other countries. Publications on quality in higher education draw contributors from, *inter alia*, Hong Kong, Australia, India, Chile and Canada. The Fourth Biennial Conference of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education which was held in South Africa in 1997 attracted more than 50 papers by contributors from 20 countries and many more countries were represented. Appropriately the theme of the conference was "Quality without frontiers".

South Africa has been engaged in discussions about quality since the National Education Policy Investigation was launched in 1990. Although a relative newcomer to the 'quality movement', South Africans have not hesitated to draw on international expertise in an effort to join the global university system, especially as international accreditation of qualifications looms on the horizon. However, the most important reason for establishing a quality assurance system in South Africa is the need to achieve acceptable standards of quality across a system which has been distorted over time as a result of apartheid's discriminatory policies.

This study looks at the extent to which South Africa has relied on models of quality assurance developed in older academic systems, notably those in Europe. The study is interested in how much South Africa's approach has been borrowed and what dynamics within the South African system have given it its specific character.

CHAPTER ONE : INTRODUCTION

1. International dimensions of quality in higher education

Scholarly communities have always been global: academics have collaborated across national boundaries and the judgments of their peers in countries other than their own have always been considered important (Thompson 1977). However, at the end of the twentieth century, higher education is a global enterprise operating in ways which are qualitatively different from previous kinds of international academic exchange. This is a direct consequence of globalization, as Hall *et al* (1992: 65) say, "[a] multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that transcend the nation-states ... [now] make up the modern world system". This is reflected in the increased mobility of academics and students as well as graduates who seek employment in the global marketplace and who, therefore, need to have portable qualifications. This has brought on to the academic agenda the question of quality. The globalization of quality assurance in higher education is partly in response to the needs of new mobile communities, and there is every likelihood that these communities will grow. Related to this, however, is the realization that *all* students need to be prepared for life in the global marketplace. Furthermore, higher education institutions are also mindful of the need to be internationally competitive so that they can attract foreign students and the resources which follow them (Lenn 1996). Finally, one of the features of globalization is that we live in a world "where increasingly [our] values are perceived as shared despite varying interpretations" (Perlmutter reprinted in Hall *et al* 1992: 103). This is certainly true with respect to the role of the university and its "social, democratic and (not just) economic purposes" and it explains the international dialogue around quality assurance in higher education (King 1995:17).

Concerns about quality began to dominate discussions in higher education in the mid-1980s in Europe and the United States. Soon these concerns spread to other countries: publications on quality in higher education draw contributors from, *inter alia*, Hong Kong, Australia, India and Canada (see Craft 1992, 1994). South Africa has also been drawn into this development. The fourth biennial conference of the International

Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education was held in South Africa in May 1997, attracting participants from Poland, the Philippines, China, Ghana, Argentina. More than 50 papers were presented by representatives of 20 countries and many more countries were represented (INQAAHE Conference 1997). The conference in 1993 was attended by participants from forty-five countries (Lenn 1994). Appropriately, the theme of the 1997 conference was "Quality without frontiers".

South Africa began its own discussion about quality in higher education long before 1997. After Nelson Mandela was released in 1990 and all previously banned political organizations were again able to operate legally, policy planning in education began in earnest. In December 1990, the National Education Policy Investigation was launched "to interrogate policy options in all areas of education" (NEPI Framework Report 1992:vii). In addition to its Framework Report, two years later NEPI produced twelve research reports including one on post-secondary education (PSE). The Framework report identified what was already an international problem in higher education: "the contradiction between quality PSE and increased access in a climate of scarce resources" (NEPI Framework Report:208).

In South Africa this contradiction is complicated by "serious structural distortions and inequalities" between higher education institutions (NEPI PSE Report: 41). For example, the majority of black university students are enrolled at institutions which are disadvantaged with respect to, *inter alia*, under-preparedness of students, inadequate staffing resources (academic and administrative), lack of research capacity, limited access to private sources of funding. These Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) are the legacy of apartheid education. 'Distortions' relate to the existence of 'English' and 'Afrikaans' academic cultures and the contrasting roles which these institutions fulfilled in the previous dispensation (see Viljoen 1977 and Bozzoli 1977). The NEPI PSE Report recognized that, because of these factors, South African higher education needed to meet "acceptable quality standards" but that this would have to be balanced with the needs for access, development and redress (116).

This is the central dilemma of quality assurance in South African higher education and

the manner in which universities try to address this issue will be taken up in greater detail later in this study. Suffice it to say, however, that a successful future for South Africa can be achieved through the development of its scientific and technological base and its participation in the global economic system. *All* South Africa's higher education institutions need to be capable of contributing to the achievement of these goals. This could mean that different institutions serve different purposes within the system, but the quality of educational provision will have to be consistent. In order to achieve consistency, it has been recognized that a quality assurance system for South African higher education will have to be strongly oriented toward improvement (NCHE 1997).

2. The functions of higher education

Quoting Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown (1935) notes, in applying the concept of function to human societies, "that the 'function' of a social institution is the correspondence between it and the needs of the social organism" (reprinted in McQuarie 1995:9). The university fulfils several important functions in society. It contributes to progress by mobilizing and organizing society's intellectual resources (Scott 1984). During the course of the twentieth century, universities have come to be seen as "institutions that [can] make a direct and powerful contribution to the acceleration of economic growth or the promotion of social justice" (ibid.: 54). The needs of modern knowledge-based economies are met by graduates who have specific "values and capabilities" as a result of having acquired a university education (King 1995:14). The economic well-being of graduates is enhanced as they are usually better paid than non-university graduates (ibid.). These functions apply to all countries regardless of their stage of economic development although in former European colonies universities have also been the vehicle for addressing "the need for cultural liberation, the creation of substitute elites, and urgent tasks of national development" (Scott 1984:59).

3. Characteristics of the modern university

The modern university differs from its predecessor, the liberal university, in several important ways. Whereas the liberal university was crucial to reproducing society's élites, many more people enjoy access to higher education than in the period before the Second World War. In fact, the modern university owes its expansion to "the generation of rapid economic growth which followed ... the Bretton Woods settlement of the post-war economic order" (Scott 1984:56). The reproduction of élites continues, however. The move to mass higher education has merely made "access to these élites more equitable and broader" and this group now constitutes "the leading strata of all the technical and economic organisations of the society" (ibid.: 74; Trow as quoted in Scott 1984:74).

With respect to knowledge, firstly, the modern university no longer monopolises its production and, secondly, there has been a compression of the time which elapses between knowledge production, dissemination and utilization by society at large. The monastic group of scholars has been replaced by institutions which have an immediate and instrumental role in society. This shift from reflection on knowledge to knowledge production has profoundly changed the way in which the state and society relate to universities and has led to a situation in which "the preoccupations of the university [are] more directly and intensely influenced by the interests of the state, or the economy and civil society" (ibid.: 55). This has meant that there is greater permeability in the boundary between the university and society at large–a permeability which has become an 'intrusion' in the form of demands for greater accountability and assurance of the quality of university programmes.

4. The role of the state and quality assurance in higher education

There was considerable growth in the state-funded higher education systems of most industrialised countries after the Second World War and a concomitant increase in its portion of the Gross National Product. National wealth did not grow at the same pace, but there was never an indication that financial support from the state was under threat. This changed in the late 1970s and early 1980s as countries with publicly-funded higher education systems began to reach the limits of state financial support,

and governments in Europe began to look at ways of reducing expenditure. But, because of the shift to "technology based economies and [the] need to mobilise human resources", it was necessary to find ways to do more with smaller financial resources (Maassen 1995: 63). This meant that universities had to find ways to increase access without compromising the quality of educational provision.

Maassen links the "dominant and central role of European governments in higher education governance and finance" to the emergence of the modern research university (ibid.). In this role the state focused on the inputs and process of higher education. (This is very different from the South African experience. We will see in Chapter Three that the South African government intervened in higher education as opposed to steering the sector; it only became a unified system at the end of 1997 when the Higher Education Act was promulgated.) Governments only relinquished this role when it ceased to be an effective way to manage higher education systems. Higher education institutions were granted greater autonomy, but, in exchange, were expected "to produce the output the government expect[ed] them to produce" (ibid.:73). Attention thus shifted to measuring and evaluating the outputs of higher education systems. To be able to do so, governments needed to develop new mechanisms of quality assurance and control (ibid.). This development has been controversial and continues to generate debate.

5. Aim of the study

In his study, *Higher Education in the Third World*, Altbach observes that "Third World universities function in an international system dominated by the industrialized nations [in which they] find themselves dependent on [these] more central, larger and older academic systems" (1987:2-3). Altbach makes the valid point that the notion of a 'Third World' is inadequate to understanding the "wide variations in scope and nature of higher education" in a range of countries which have traditionally been defined in this way, and that it would be more appropriate to "make distinctions [on the basis of] regions and countries" (ibid.:3). South Africa, for example, has many features, culturally and institutionally, of its previous colonisers, particularly Great Britain. Despite the diversity within the South African university system, all

institutions conform to a "basically Western model of the university" (ibid.:5). This model is expanded on later in this chapter.

Given the nature of South African universities and the global dimensions of higher education, the study was undertaken to determine the extent to which South African universities have relied on models of quality assurance developed in the "older academic systems". The study will show the extent to which the methods and mechanisms of quality assurance in South African higher education have been shaped by international experience and current practice. It is interested in understanding how much its approach to quality assurance has been borrowed and what dynamics within the South African system have given it its specific character. It was particularly important to explore the viability of international models for an equitable quality assurance initiative in South Africa given the inequalities in the current system and the fact that discussions about ways to address these inequalities have always been highly politicized, fraught with tension and divisive. Has it been possible, for example, to find methods and mechanisms which allow for diversity and promote improvement without stirring up hostilities? South Africa is in the enviable position of being able to draw on good practice elsewhere and a wide range of international expertise has played a large role in contributing to the development of policy (see NEPI 1992, SAJHE 1993 and 1995, Strydom *et al* 1996, QPU Audit Manual 1998).

This study has used the comparative approach in looking at current international practice with respect to quality assurance in higher education because "a thorough comparative analysis ... might help to show more or less universal needs, tasks and problems ... at the respective historical moment and eventually uncover the best possible solution" (Teichler 1995:28). Furthermore, "a comparison of different ... systems and an exploration of their respective strengths and weaknesses are useful heuristic tools in understanding one's own situation and in identifying possible options" (ibid.). This approach is especially useful in the South African context. The current higher education system is made up of institutions with widely divergent institutional traditions and constituencies. South Africa's quality assurance system has the dual challenges of establishing a 'quality culture' and building consensus about the need for quality assurance in higher education. This investigation into the

Finally, I interviewed Professor Wieland Gevers (Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Planning), UCT) and Professor Ian Bunting (Dean of the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, UCT). Professor Gevers is a member of the QPU Management Board and one of the architects of the Quality Promotion Unit. Professor Bunting has written extensively on higher education in South Africa and is a contributor to the discussion about quality assurance in South Africa, particularly in the area of performance indicators.

The above information was organized to present the study in the following way: the first chapter (very briefly) sketches the state of higher education at the end of the twentieth century and the issues which confront universities, in particular. Chapter Two reviews the literature on the debates around the definition of quality and provides an overview of the methods and mechanisms of quality assurance in higher education. As I have noted above, one effect of globalization is the sense that human beings share a common experience despite their different (and diverse) national origins. A study of this nature illuminates the impact of globalization on higher education and reveals the extent to which higher education institutions in different countries face similar problems. However, the diversity of responses to quality assurance in higher education tells us that local conditions play an important role in shaping policy and practice. Thus Chapter Three looks at the unique features of the South African higher education system and describes the formation of the Quality Promotion Unit and its institutional audits. Chapter Four provides a brief critique on international and local systems of quality assurance and offers concluding remarks on the future of the university.

I have approached this study as a practitioner who is interested in studying how trends in higher education policy are interpreted by systems (and later by institutions) and how these trends are shaped by local conditions. Space did not allow me to explore institutional responses to quality assurance as part of this study, but it could be an area for further exploration at the end of the first round of the QPU's audits. But, while my focus has been system-wide, at no stage have I attempted to offer a 'grand theory' about quality assurance in higher education. On the contrary, I have taken a pragmatic approach to the topic. I also made a conscious decision not to conduct a survey. My

intention was to interrogate the available literature in an effort to present a critical review of current practice internationally as well as locally in order to inform my own interpretation and implementation of policy when the time comes.

7. Limitations of the investigation

The limitations of an overview is that it is a broad sweep and, consequently, specificity is sacrificed. An overview also presents the challenge of bringing coherence to a wide range of information. The best way to do this seemed to be to focus on methods of quality assurance and then to describe one or two mechanisms which employed the methods. The two examples were chosen because of their impact on the nature of quality assurance mechanisms developed for South African universities. It is important to emphasize that this is not an exhaustive study.

Note on terminology : 'university' as opposed to 'higher education institution'

The words 'university' and 'higher education institution' appear to be used interchangeably in this paper. In fact, Teichler (1995) questions the extent to which the university and non-university sector differ from each other in Europe and uses examples of several countries to illustrate how their systems differ in the emphasis on, and balance between, professional and disciplinary preparation at the tertiary educational level. However, in the South African context, there are still marked differences between the university and the non-university sector in that universities still tend to place emphasis on research and scholarship, and stress the importance of research to further knowledge in a discipline and as informing good teaching. These differences persist despite the fact that technikons are now also degree-granting institutions up to doctoral level (whereas previously they only conferred diplomas). For this reason, in the chapter on South Africa, the term 'higher education' will be used when referring to both technikons and universities and the latter term will be used where an issue has specific relevance for universities.

CHAPTER TWO : SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

1. Introduction

Although quality has been one of the three most talked about issues in higher education in the last fifteen years (next to access and funding), it would be true to say that there is neither a universal definition of, nor agreement on, "what quality is or might be" (Barnett 1992:1). Most people would agree that a thing of quality is usually exceptional and outstanding: a quality item has special (positive) attributes and is imbued with goodness and worth. This, in fact, is the paradox: while people feel confident that they can identify quality, they have great difficulty in articulating what constitutes quality and consequently cannot arrive at a definition which is universally acceptable. Traditional notions of quality as "exceptional", "extraordinary", "without defects" or as "self evident" are considered elitist as they imply that there is no need for scrutiny (Green 1994:170). On the other hand, defining quality as 'fitness for purpose' is problematic as well as it appears to exclude the notion of excellence. So 'quality' is a contested term in higher education and the debate about its definition is 'political' in that it is conducted by stakeholders with competing claims on education.

There are several participants in the debate over quality. Each brings to the discussion his/her own perspective on higher education which frames the way in which quality is defined and perceived. These different stakeholders have been called the

> contemporary voices [of higher education and] include the following: technicist (the imposition of technical instruments); collegial (the collective voice of the academic community); epistemic (the territorial claims of a particular disciplinary community); consumerist (the claims of the participants); employers (the voice of the labour market accepting the products of the system); professional (the voices of the separate professional bodies); and inspectoral (the voices of the state and other external agencies with an authorized right to inspect higher education and pronounce on what they find (Barnett 1992:6).

These protagonists can be broadly grouped into three categories: the State, the marketplace and the academic community. The shape and character of a given higher education system will depend on the extent to which each of these groups enjoys

primary influence. Furthermore, the relevant dominance of each group is likely to shape the way in which quality is defined and the way in which it is operationalised i.e., the mechanism which is employed to assess quality.

The state is likely to be concerned chiefly with how it can widen access to higher education without increasing unit costs: efficiency is thus paramount. The marketplace needs graduates who have acquired the skills which will enable them to be utilised in the workplace immediately and who therefore require little or no extra training. The consumer ("participants or would-be participants") wants value for money and a qualification which will guarantee employment (ibid.). Thus the State and the marketplace (including the consumer) are mainly concerned with the extrinsic value of higher education. On the other hand, the academic community is concerned with its intrinsic value for the individual (student) and the discipline so quality is likely to be defined by the extent to which academic activities successfully broaden the boundaries of knowledge and whether a university education 'adds value' to the individual.

When this argument is extended to the manner in which quality is defined, one sees that definitions which originate outside of academic institutions tend to conceive of quality in terms of an institution's performance as reflected in numerical indicators or other quantitative measures of performance. In this view "higher education is seen as the issuing of products, with inputs and outputs. Students are units destined for the open market" and "[a]n institution's effectiveness is assessed, to a significant degree at least, in terms of its efficiency" (ibid.:7). On the other hand, the academic community tends to favour definitions of quality which coincide with their regard for the intrinsic values of higher education and they are likely to prefer peer review and other qualitative approaches to quality assurance.

These conceptions of quality, which Barnett describes as being *instrumental* and *communicative*, are at odds with each other in that the instrumental version originates outside of higher education institutions and reflects the values and interests of the world outside higher education both in terms of the purposes of higher education and the manner which it should be assessed and improved. In South Africa, for example,

universities are urged to engage in teaching and research which are relevant to its African context and thus the extent to which they demonstrate that shift in focus would be assessed by an external agency. Quality assurance also calls for measurable outcomes–an external demand. In contrast, "[t]he communicative version ... takes the continuing conversation of the academic community as self-sufficient" (ibid.). This approach is seldom open to non-academic perspectives outside higher education and is particularly hostile to industry, the source of many aspects of quality assurance.

One could argue that the categorisation of quality as being either instrumental or communicative is an over-simplification. Responses to quality assurance are not divided neatly into two camps. As this chapter will show, quality assurance mechanisms are shaped by the extent to which either the state, the marketplace or the academic community enjoys the greatest amount of influence in a given system or institution. Within this 'hybridisation', tensions between these three forces remain, since they have different agendas and originate in different philosophical approaches to higher education. As a result, quality assurance in higher education continues to be a site of contestation. For example, in Australia, tensions arose between administrative and academic staff. Administrative staff saw their role as responding to, and carrying out, government policy as they believed that, by doing so, it would lead to the desired improvements in the academic sectors, namely,

> faculty becoming excellent teachers who continually monitor and improve their teaching and program, involving students and external stakeholders in revisions ...
>
> ... faculty becoming keen researchers who continually and successfully apply for research grants and publish the results of the research in internationally refereed journals ...
>
> ... faculty fulfilling all those roles and representing all those values which the mission statement embodies (Moses 1994:4).

Moses reports that these objectives were not achieved for two reasons. Firstly, academics and administrators did not enjoy a "shared discourse" (ibid.). Secondly, academics were resistant to the manner in which change in their institutions was being managed. Both contributed to feelings of alienation among academics. The jargon of the quality movement, which is largely borrowed from industry, was anathema to the majority of Australian university lecturers who had difficulty relating to "concepts like

performance indicators, quality assurance, total quality management, stakeholder, customer or client, input and output" (ibid.).

Academics in Australia were also alienated by the adoption of management styles borrowed from business and industry which have replaced collegiality as the way to manage institutions: "loose accountability" has been replaced by "clear line-management responsibilities" and lip-service is paid to substantive input from the professoriate (ibid.). There are important differences between the collegial and managerial cultures. The former is characterised by respect for research and scholarship. Many academics subscribe to the belief that the purpose of higher education is to generate, interpret and disseminate knowledge and to develop "specific values and qualities of character among young men and women who are future leaders of our society" (although this notion would today be considered elitist, it still enjoys some currency). Quality is assured via peer review of research and publications "but otherwise there is reluctance to formalise reviewing" (ibid.:5).

Within the managerial culture activities are more structured: Moses (ibid.) notes that "work is directed toward specified goals and purposes and is organised, implemented and evaluated accordingly"; that the managerial culture values "fiscal responsibility and effective supervisory skills ... and it is assumed that goals and objectives can be clearly defined and measured. " Some have argued that a collegial institutional culture is incompatible with the managerial nature of structured quality assurance procedures and that academics are resistant to quality assurance because they reject the bureaucratization of their professional lives. More importantly, they see quality assurance as threatening "their core values" (ibid.). University academics have, until recently, enjoyed a large amount of autonomy. Having identified their research interests while still in training (i.e., as Masters and Doctoral students), for the most part, they are able to continue to pursue such interests when they are appointed to full-time academic positions and, furthermore, are free to take their research in new directions. Quality assurance is seen as threatening this essential aspect of what it means to be an academic.

These tensions, between managerialism and collegiality and between individual academic autonomy and accountability (to the state and to society at large), are recurring themes in the discussion on quality assurance in the modern university. The 'quality culture' is sustained by a burgeoning administration which is charged (essentially) with 'surveillance' of academic activity on behalf of the state as well as other stakeholders.

This chapter will describe the *methods* of quality assurance which are currently in use internationally, their historical origins (where appropriate) and the context(s) in which they arise. The first example is *peer review*, which has long been a feature of academic life, but which has had the definition of 'peer' broadened. Peer review is increasingly used in combination with quantitative forms of assessment such as *performance indicators*, the origins and use of which are also described in detail. The merits of newer approaches to quality assurance drawn from management theory are also explored, namely *Total Quality Management* and *Continuous Quality Improvement*. The chapter finally assesses *self-regulation,* a characteristic of higher education in the United States where it is known as *accreditation* and an approach which is widely used in Western Europe.

The chapter will show that there are problems and pitfalls in most quality assurance methods and mechanisms and that there is considerable debate on the merits of each approach.

Explanation of terms

The following terms are used most frequently in the literature on quality assurance in higher education. Although the terms are used interchangeably, there are important distinctions between them.

> *Quality Assurance* - refers to the processes whereby higher education institutions ensure that all aspects of their activities meet agreed threshold standards. The standards can be determined internally (i.e. within the institution by departments and by the institution), or set by outside bodies--government and/or professional bodies.
>
> *Quality audit (or quality monitoring)* - usually undertaken by an external agency. An institution's internal quality assurance processes are evaluated to

establish whether they are effective in enabling the institution to assess the quality of its activities.

Quality control – a system of checks which ensures that a product or the service which is provided meets certain minimum criteria. This term, which has strong industrial connotations is hardly used in the context of quality in higher education, although it is likely to appear in more process-oriented approaches to quality assurance such as Total Quality Management or Continuous Improvement (see 4 below).

Quality assessment and quality measurement – procedures and measurements adopted by higher education systems in order to determine the quality of institutions or programmes.

Accreditation - the use of this term originated in the United States. Accreditation arose at a time when there was a proliferation of higher education institutions and concern about the quality of institutions as well as their degree programmes was initiated by higher education institutions to pre-empt regulation of higher education by the federal (central) government. Accreditation applies to degree programmes and institutions. In the US

> [a]ccreditation assures the educational community, the general public, and other agencies or organisations that an institution or programme (a) has clearly defined and educationally appropriate objectives, (b) maintains conditions under which their achievement can reasonably be expected, (c) is in fact accomplishing them substantially, and (d) can be expected to continue to do so. (Chernay as cited in Frazer 1994:106.)

Although the above description makes no reference to threshold standards which institutions are required to achieve, in some countries, "accreditation would imply that at least a threshold standard was intended and being achieved" (Frazer 1994:107).

This term will take on an international dimension due to increased exchanges between countries and the growth of distance education delivered via the Internet: the need for quality assurance in these two areas will become important in the coming years.

2. Peer review

Peer review has long been an important and respected method of quality control in higher education. Its origins can be found in the English medieval universities' model of self-governance: "[t]he masters decided among themselves what should be taught and who should teach" (van Vught 1994:4). Peer review, as it is practised in higher

education today, began as an attempt to encourage scientists to share their discoveries with colleagues in order to advance scientific knowledge. By subjecting their work to the critical scrutiny of colleagues, their discoveries could be authenticated (Lock, 1991). Thus evolved the practice of subjecting scientific research to assessment by colleagues working in the same discipline in order to judge whether a piece of research is worthy of publication. Via this method of assessment peers test and/or offer opinion on the validity of each other's research findings in order to determine whether such findings should be communicated to the rest of the scientific community (ibid.). A piece of research which has been reviewed also offers the scientific community the assurance that the work is authentic. The chief concern of the editor of the scientific journal is "to ensure quality" (ibid.:6). Once the articles have been sorted out and the decision is made about which to subject to peer review, the editor has to rely on the judgement of referees to maintain the quality of the journal. The referees are considered to be qualified to judge the work of their peers as they are usually eminent figures in the particular discipline or field of study.

The concept of peer review is applied more loosely when used in quality assurance for higher education and refers to all forms of assessment which involve human judgement, namely

> [t]he involvement of people as active university teachers, as researchers or as practising professionals to offer advice and to make judgements and/or decisions about proposals for new programmes, the continuation or modification of existing programmes, the quality of research programmes or the quality of institutions (Frazer 1992:12-13).

The peer review process often involves detailed feedback which is meant to offer the person being judged advice on how to improve the work which has been reviewed.

There are several advantages to peer review, namely "its high content validity" as it facilitates the direct assessment of quality, without proxy indicators; it is also flexible: it is an approach which can be adapted to a variety of disciplines (van Vught and Westerheijden 1993:XV). In assessing the quality of service delivery in general medical practice, peer review is the "[c]ontinuous, systematic and critical reflection on their own and others' performance by a number of colleagues ... with the aim of achieving a continuous improvement in the quality of patient care" (Grol and

Lawrence 1995:3). Within the context of quality assurance, it is considered to be a "powerful stimulus for bringing about desirable change" because it is carried out by colleagues who "respect each other and know the ... situation well" (ibid. 1995:9).

It is, however, highly subjective: "[t]he judgements always result from unverifiable mental processes in the judges. The peer review process therefore remains something of a black box" (van Vught and Westerheijden 1993:XV). In the publication process, for example, personal bias has sometimes played a role in decisions not to publish manuscripts. In fact, study of publication patterns in psychological journals by Peters and Ceci during the 1970s revealed "what many scientists still believe: peer review is incompetent; heavily biased by factors such as personal and institutional status, sex, and nationality; and open to abuse because of research conflicts of interests between the author and the referee" (Lock 1991:25). Other studies have echoed these findings: bias does exist, although it appears to be related to status as opposed to individuals: the work of well-known authors is more likely to be read (and published) than of authors who have not yet made a name for themselves in a discipline. The work of Nobel laureates attracts more attention. A related form of bias is that of 'rank': person's standing in the discipline (membership and rank within professional societies) is likely to increase his or her chances of getting articles published. Other forms of bias have been identified by studies of publication patterns: for a long time the number of women being published was disproportionate to their representation in academia, although blatant gender bias on a large scale no longer appears to be a feature of academic publishing.

As these examples from academic publishing show, the centrality of human judgement in peer review accounts for the fact that (almost inevitably) subjectivity will be its "defining characteristic" (van Vught and Westerheijden 1993:XIV). Thus, if it is to have any validity in quality assurance, it is crucial that the process is governed by explicit guidelines which have been negotiated between the assessors and the assessed. Traditionally peer review has been governed by discipline-specific norms which are not usually explicit and which cannot be applied across disciplines. Furthermore, the shift in focus from "'intrinsic' research goals, namely scientific quality and progress [to] other 'extrinsic' goals, such as social relevance and

accountability towards the funding organizations" means that peer review has to be applied in a different way (ibid.:XV). Hence the importance of structured and unambiguous procedures cannot be overrated.

The literature on peer review in quality assurance reveals that considerable effort goes into guaranteeing the legitimacy of the process. This can be achieved by ensuring that peer review groups are "both independent of and acceptable to the institution being evaluated [and] balanced in terms of ... skills and areas of expertise" (Ottenwaelter 1996:3). If not, there is a real danger "of self confirmation and of too little distance ... leading to a lack of critical reflection" (van Hartingsveld 1996:3).

3. Performance Indicators

The use of performance indicators in higher education is not new. In fact, performance indicators, as numerical representations of achievement, are as old as assessment itself. What *is* new, however, is their use in the public sector in general, and in higher education in particular, to measure institutional performance for a variety of purposes.

3.1 Origins of the Use of Performance Indicators

The use of performance indicators in the public sector can be traced back to the United States in the 1960s (Carter *et al*: 1992). The period since World War II had seen increases in the size and complexity of government departments with concomitant concerns about the rational and effective use of resources. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson called on all government departments to adopt a system of planning, programming and budgeting (PPB) which had been implemented in the Department of Defence four years earlier. The basic principles of this new system called for government departments to:

- set objectives,
- indicate how resources would be used to meet these objectives,
- develop measures which could be used to analyse whether the objectives had been met effectively,
- establish whether there were other, cheaper ways to achieve these objectives,

- plan programmes and then devise reporting measures to illustrate whether the methods which have been chosen are appropriate and effective (ibid.).

These ideas, "very much the product of the era of faith in managerial rationalism", soon spread across the Atlantic to Britain and by 1970, the Department of Education and Science had explored the feasibility of adopting budgeting techniques which focused on outcomes--one of the basic tenets of this new approach (ibid.:9). However, the system turned out to be labour-intensive and costly in terms of staff time and expertise and it was consequently abandoned--to be replaced by a new concept, Programme Analysis and Review (PAR), which was itself discontinued by the mid-1970s. The purpose of all this activity was to find a way to achieve (and demonstrate) greater efficiency in government as well as transparency and accountability: the British Government's Select Committee on Procedure reported in 1969 that government spending had to be planned and managed efficiently, individuals and departments had to demonstrate efficient performance in relation to objectives and ways had to be found to measure such performance (ibid.).

These developments in the public sector also drew increasingly on the influence of economists in the civil service who introduced concepts like cost-benefit analysis (ibid.). The difficulty with their approach, however, was that 'outputs' in the public sector were not easy to identify, let alone measure--certainly not in money terms, with which economists were most comfortable. Furthermore, techniques drawn from economics had little success in regulating government spending and in bringing about efficiency and effectiveness. These problems continue to plague the use of performance indicators in the public sector and are the topics of considerable debate. Much of the effort around developing performance indicators in higher education has gone into identifying which aspects of the educational experience lend themselves to accurate and efficient measurement.

3.2 Performance Indicators in Higher Education

During the 1980s there was increased activity in several countries around the development and use of performance indicators for higher education for the very reasons they had been introduced in other parts of the public sector: namely, in response to calls for greater accountability, competitiveness, efficiency and in order to engage in strategic management. Meek has observed that

> [i]nterest in and use of performance indicators is not restricted to the higher education sector. It is more that higher education is caught in a broad web of socio-economic and political imperatives designed to make all public sector institutions more cost efficient and internationally competitive. (1995:1)

Others have noted that the use of performance indicators reflects the rise of a 'market-oriented' culture in higher education, and a way in which to satisfy the state (and other stakeholders) that there is value for money in the sector and that system is efficient and cost-effective. Still others have argued that "decisions to introduce performance indicators in education systems and institutions are normally political ones which are taken in contexts of changing governance requirements" (Bunting 1997:139). So, for example, the introduction of performance indicators in the UK sought to alter the role of university councils from one which was "'fiduciary and supportive'" to one which took a pro-active approach to "'planning, resource allocation and accountability'" (Cave 1991, as quoted in Bunting 1997:140). Finally, "[t]he increased use of performance indicators needs to be seen as part and parcel of a broader move to entrench an 'evaluative culture' (see Neave 1988) in higher education ... fuelled by the dual demands of accountability and quality assurance" (Meek 1995:1).

Performance indicators in higher education have been used by institutions and governments for a variety of purposes: quality monitoring, measuring efficiency, monitoring progress toward achieving institutional or system-wide goals (improvements), intra- and inter-institutional comparisons, allocation of resources and planning (Kells 1992). Performance indicators can also illustrate how an institution has changed over time. In quality monitoring, performance indicators are proxies: numerical representations of a qualitative assessment or evaluation. They facilitate the measurement of performance in relation to goals or expected outcomes and are

normally used within a framework of values and principles. Performance indicators are most useful for intra-institutional improvement and planning as aids in making management choices. However, governments are more likely to be interested in using performance indicators for purposes of accountability and comparison.

3.3 Definitions

It is important to distinguish between performance indicators and management information or statistics (raw data). It is the use of performance indicators in relation to "specified goals and objectives that distinguish[es] them from mere descriptive statistics" (Mackay cited in Meek 1995:6). Raw data become performance indicators when they are used to translate an evaluation of a given activity into a numerical value so that it can be put to the variety of purposes outlined above (Spee and Bormans cited in Meek 1995).

3.4 Some key issues for higher education

The use of performance indicators is appealing in that their quantitative dimension implies greater 'objectivity' than say, peer review or self-appraisal (Green 1994). As a tool for assessing performance as part of quality assurance, the use of numerical indicators is, however, problematic and several aspects of its use are contested. Key issues with regard to the use of performance indicators are highlighted below.

(a) Comparing and ranking

There is agreement in the literature on performance indicators that they are useless without being placed in context and, in higher education, performance indicators are often used for comparative purposes (Barnett 1992). "[C]omparative judgements about quality (of institutions, subjects or programmes of study) and the publication of 'league tables'" are made on the basis that the customer has a right to know the worth of products in the marketplace in order to make an informed decision (Green 1994:173). But, if performance indicators are going to be used to rank institutions, there has to be agreement on the methodology and the criteria on which each individual institution is going to be judged (Green 1994). Unless there is agreement on the basis for comparison, performance indicators are unreliable (van Vught and

Westerheijden 1993). Uniformity is not a hallmark of higher education systems and to use numerical values to make comparisons, without taking cognisance of complexities and differences, is problematic (Kells 1992). The units or institutions being compared have to share common characteristics. For example, in programme assessment, the measures used would relate directly to the nature of the programme and will probably not lend themselves to comparison with other programmes within an institution, let alone with similar programmes at other institutions. The extent to which any number of variables impacts on a given programme, system or institution is not known: the influence of political, economic and social factors have to be taken into consideration (Kells 1992).

Still, it is not the most glaring differences which undermine comparison: institutions often exhibit subtle variations which should discourage one from taking indicators at face value (Barnett 1992). At the disciplinary level, approaches and methodologies can differ widely, making it extremely difficult to compare departments within an institution using "'objective' measures of achievement" (Meek 1995:9). Policy decisions based on the assumption of similarities between institutions (and programmes) could be potentially damaging (Kells 1992). Unless all institutions have the same goals it is difficult (and potentially dangerous) to compare them (Meek 1995).

(b) Relevance

Performance indicators tend to focus on activities which are easy to quantify. They may, however, have little to do with the core functions of education, namely teaching and learning. One of the reasons for this may be that not enough knowledge exists about the actual processes of teaching and how to influence the outcome, namely student learning (van Vught and Westerheijden 1993, see also Barnett, 1989). As a consequence, a picture of an institution's quality could be skewed by using indicators which are unable to adequately capture its various dimensions. There is no perfect correlation between a performance indicator and the concept of quality which it is trying to measure. Hence there is no assurance that the 'snapshot' is an accurate representation of a given situation.

(c) The difficulties of measuring efficiency

Performance indicators which convey quality in education have not yet been developed since quality is extremely difficult to quantify and because the term itself is contested. Performance indicators in education are mainly concerned with efficiency and effectiveness (van Vught and Westerheijden 1993). However, "[i]t is not easy to measure cause and effect when the system contains variable input influences, goals, structures, programs, critical mass levels, and external influence" (Kells 1992:8). Indeed, a major contention is whether efficiency can be measured in higher education in the same way as it is measured in the marketplace. For example, the profitability of a business is an indicator of its efficiency. It is not clear, however, what constitutes efficiency in higher education or how one measures the effectiveness of an institution or a programme.

The adoption of the production function approach in order to circumvent this problem has generated considerable debate. This model approaches higher education as a process which involves the transformation of inputs to outputs under the broad headings of teaching and research. There are several components of this model (as well as different versions)--all points at which performance is measured, namely: inputs, process or productivity, intermediate outputs, final outputs (Cave *et al* 1990). [Other models have between three and five steps in the process and attempt to measure 'outcome' as well as 'impact'. The principle, however, remains basically the same (see also Carter *et al* 1992).]

The production function approach to performance indicators also uses the operation of financial and labour markets as the basis of analysis. Hence, the rate of 'return' on 'investment' is calculated, as well as the relation of inputs to outputs and costs to benefits. This approach is problematic mainly because it is labour intensive, but also because, in higher education, it is difficult to relate particular costs to particular benefits; how, for example, does one measure the rate of return on an investment of time in a student or on a piece of research (Cave *et al* 1990). Other critics of the production model observe that this approach "neglects the specific characteristics of higher education, in particular its formative nature" (Goedegebuure and Kaiser 1995:5). This critique also implies that teaching and research are 'black boxes' which

cannot be broken down into inputs, processes and outputs. While the authors reject this argument, they concede that indicators for teaching and research have to be "sufficiently sensitive ... to adequately capture the nature of the primary processes" (ibid.:6).

In fact, it is particularly difficult to develop indicators for good teaching. One example is the notion of 'value-added' which is regarded as an attractive indicator. It is believed that this can be measured by relating a student's academic standing at entry to performance in the final examination. However, while one can claim a relationship between the two, the extent to which a direct correlation can be established for large groups of students is debatable (Cave *et al* 1990).

(d) Factors in the use of performance indicators

The development and use of performance indicators are influenced by the nature of evaluation, i.e., whether it is programmatic or institutional (Kells 1992). Other purposes of evaluation also affect the development and use of performance indicators, i.e., whether they are used: to ensure accountability to government policy; to monitor progress in achieving goals set by the state; to measure improvement in relation to state or institutional goals; for planning purposes; to effect rationalization; for "assessment against guild or professional criteria" (ibid.:11). Kells argues that a given set of procedures is not applicable for all of the above purposes and "some of these ... will not work well with or will even seriously impede the achievement of others" (ibid.:11). So, for example, only some of the results of the evaluation of a programme in chemical engineering against professional criteria will be made public. However, the specific findings should be used for internal improvement (identifying shortcomings could be detrimental to public confidence in the programme, hence the need to select which results will be publicised).

(e) Capacity

Other features reveal some of the contradictions regarding the use of performance indicators: the time and effort involved in collecting and monitoring performance indicators can sometimes outweigh their benefits leading some to suggest that they should be comprehensive and 'bounded'. Comprehensive in the sense that they

encompass all aspects relevant to strategic decision-making, but 'bounded' so that the volume is manageable as there are concerns about the proliferation of performance indicators (Carter *et al* 1992) and whether some institutions have the capacity to maintain and develop them.

(f) Reliability and credibility

One of the most crucial elements of performance indicators is their credibility: they need to be "statistically valid and reliable" and reflect accurately what they are trying to measure; the data has to be "stable over time, replicable, and not subject to manipulation in the sense that it indicates changes that in fact have not taken place" (Goedegebuure and Kaiser 1995:9).

Performance indicators cannot be based on unreliable data, hence the need for sophisticated information systems in order to facilitate the development and analysis of performance indicators and this calls for a substantial investment in information technology (Carter *et al* 1992). This issue is critical in the South African context, where it is arguable whether the development of sophisticated information systems is achievable by all institutions across the higher education system. Certainly it may be within the means of some institutions to make the necessary financial investment as they have the human resource capacity to develop and maintain performance indicators. Other institutions, however, may have different financial and human resource priorities.

(g) "dials, tin-openers or alarm bells"

In the context of using performance indicators to assess quality, it is helpful to classify them as *prescriptive*, *descriptive* and *proscriptive.* Prescriptive performance indicators are linked to objectives or targets and would be used to monitor an organization's or unit's progress towards meeting them. Descriptive performance indicators can be a 'snapshot' as well a way of recording change. Proscriptive indicators draw attention to "things which simply should not happen in a well-run organisation" (ibid.:49).

The authors liken the three categories to "dials, tin-openers or alarm-bells." Ideally, prescriptive performance indicators should, like a dial, point to precise "inputs, outputs and outcomes based on a clear understanding of what good and bad performance entails" (ibid). As noted earlier, however, there are few instances in the public sector where it is possible to obtain precise measures of performance due to the complexity surrounding the relation of inputs to outputs, and the difficulty of measuring outcomes. To some extent, measuring progress in relation to targets avoids this problem, although it does mean that assessment of quality is sacrificed. It also explains the use of performance indicators for descriptive purposes, i.e., as tin openers as opposed to dials: "by opening up a 'can of worms' they do not give answers but prompt interrogation and inquiry, and by themselves provide an incomplete and inaccurate picture" (ibid.). Proscriptive performance indicators, the 'alarm bells', draw attention to problem areas.

3.5 Problems/limitations

One of the major criticisms of performance indicators is that they reduce (or attempt to reduce) complex qualitative information to a number for the purpose of taking a 'snapshot' (Kells 1992). Another criticism relates to the use of performance indicators for comparative purposes. Kells notes the importance of ensuring that there are not more differences than similarities between programmes or institutions before making assessments based on performance indicators. The extent to which any number of variables impacts on a given programme, system or institution is not known. Here Kells cites, *inter alia*, the differences between systems which require a baccalaureate and those which do not, variations in student preparation for university study as well as levels of motivation. The influence of political, economic and social factors also has to be taken into consideration when comparing performance across institutions or systems. Simply put, performance indicators are only likely to be reliable and valid if comparisons are made within and between uniform systems, institutions and programmes. This explains why the use of performance indicators is controversial and fraught with difficulty. They are only useful if there is "agreement among the parties involved on the purpose for the assessment, on the element(s) to be assessed and the nature of the assessment data" (ibid.:10).

4. Total Quality Management

Total Quality Management (TQM) has its origins in US industry: the overwhelming majority of management theorists who have contributed to its development since the early part of this century are US citizens. However, TQM has been implemented most successfully outside the US, notably in Japan and only since the early 1980s have US industry and education rediscovered TQM (Cook, 1996).

A "synthesis of previously well-known management practices and theory aimed at creating a particular organisational culture dedicated to producing high quality products and services", TQM has been implemented successfully in the US Departments of Defence and Navy (Warren Piper 1993 as cited in Harvey 1995:15, and Suarez 1992). This has led to the belief that the current problems being experienced in higher education could benefit from the adoption of TQM's basic principles. In fact, some assert that "[t]he principles and practices associated with total quality provide a framework consistent with the best existing practices in higher education" (Lewis and Smith 1994: 6). Consequently, TQM has been welcomed as a saviour by several US colleges and universities, faced with

> a troubling nexus of rising costs, reduced federal and state funding, stagnant enrolment pools, [and] a generalized sense that graduates of public institutions are only marginally competent. (Dennis 1995:9)

While approaches to TQM may differ, the basic principles are the same,

- it "is total in three senses: it covers every process, every job, and every person" (Lewis and Smith 1994: 28). Thus every person in an organization participates in the maintenance of quality and each process *is* (re)designed to effect quality, giving rise to the concept of continuous quality improvement which is integral to total quality management;

- Continuous Quality Improvement: an approach in which quality is built into the system. Total quality came about as a rejection of quality control which relied on inspection at the end of the production process. Products which did not meet specifications were discarded or reworked. Naturally this approach was wasteful: reworked products increased labour costs and

scrap reduced profits. In-built quality, however, would address both these problems;

- TQM focuses on process, in particular the sequence of activities designed for a task, and looks at ways in which quality can be incorporated into processes so that scrap and rework are eliminated (Sherr and Lozier 1991);

- TQM is customer-driven: "the objective of the producer or service-provider should be to pre-empt customers' needs--to work out what they need before they know it themselves" (Harvey 1995:16);

- teamwork is paramount: TQM can only be successfully implemented if the organisational culture is characterised by mutual interdependence and collaboration as opposed to individual competitiveness--it relies on the participation of every person;

- 'Speak with facts': changes in the system to effect improvements should be based on hard evidence of wastage and inefficiency;

- minimize variation: 'statistical control techniques' are used to identify and eliminate any variation in the manufacturing process which could jeopardise the production of the "best possible product at the lowest possible price" (Harvey 1995:18). All processes and procedures have to be standardized;

- fitness for purpose: within the system of Total Quality Management, quality is measured neither by benchmarking nor conformance to an agreed established standard. On the contrary, quality is determined by fitness for purpose;

- respect for people: described as one of the 'pillars' of TQM, this principle calls for employees to be treated as a resource to be developed so that they

> become empowered and learn to use their own initiative as opposed to expecting to be directed and instructed by superiors. It also means that there has to be respect for the contribution and involvement of all employees since their participation is necessary for TQM to succeed.

The factors which explain the attraction of TQM for colleges and universities in the United States are familiar. As in many industrialized countries, the cost of higher education has risen at the same time as state support for the sector has dwindled. It has become increasingly difficult to finance a university education so students and parents are looking for 'value for money' and desire assurance that colleges and universities will deliver sound preparation for the job market. More importantly, in the United States there is a real sense of declining trust in higher education and increasing cynicism about what happens in colleges and universities which can be attributed to several factors (Lewis and Smith 1994).

During the period in which Reagan and Bush occupied the presidency (1980 to 1992), two issues gave rise to increasing government involvement in programme assessment which had previously been the domain of independent accreditation agencies: financial aid default rates and renewed concerns that 'diversity' could somehow be equated with lowered standards (Cook 1996). This was despite the fact that continuous review of academic programmes for the purposes of accreditation is a feature of US higher education and that, during this same period, accreditation associations had been revising programme assessment procedures with a view to prescribing minimum standards to which higher education institutions would have to conform. This was not a public process, however, which meant that people outside higher education management, namely the general public (including politicians, business and industry) were unaware of the debates (ibid.). Another factor was the focus on total quality management in business and industry and the fact that this new approach to quality emphasized customer satisfaction. Soon people were saying "if industry and business can be responsive to customers, why shouldn't institutions of higher education?" (ibid.:3).

This question can be answered in many ways. Certainly the literature identifies several "structural [and] cultural impediments" to the implementation of TQM in higher education (Lewis and Smith 1994: 12). The structure of higher education institutions, particularly the fact that academic and administrative functions are separate (as they should be), is seen to be an inhibiting factor. Cook (1996) notes that it might be possible to successfully adapt and apply most aspects of TQM to higher education administration, but that this is not so for teaching and learning. However, advocates of TQM are dismissive of the characteristics of academia which impede the application of TQM, namely:

- the individual nature of scholastic activity; highly successful academics need to be self-motivated; in fact, higher education encourages and rewards individualism and, conversely, the individual is culpable when s/he doesn't succeed; this is incompatible with the team-focused approach of TQM and Continuous Improvement (although TQM also calls for respect for people);

- uniqueness: each higher education institution likes to regard itself as being different from the rest and resists the notion that what applies to other institutions in the public sector should apply to them;

- TQM advocates continuous improvement, so that the maintenance of quality is ongoing. Higher education institutions would argue there is no need for continuous improvement since "quality has been achieved and is being practiced" (Lewis and Smith 1994: 13);

- participation in decision-making. One of the fundamental principals of TQM is that individuals should participate fully in decisions about what they do and the way in which they work. It could be argued that collegiality is not in conflict with this principle.

While this dismissal of higher education's response to TQM is meant to trivialise the objections, the literature raises fundamental criticisms of TQM's basic principles. The critiques are listed below.

Continuous Improvement: the accreditation process has always been a key feature of higher education in the US. This means that academic programmes are reviewed on a regular basis (every four, eight or ten years). Professional programmes are updated constantly in response to changes in the marketplace, the public sector and the law (Cook 1996). This surely obviates the need for continuous improvement as defined under Total Quality Management.

Respect for people: this admirable principle is often not achieved in the real world. TQM has come unstuck when communication between sectors has broken down; in particular, when line managers have not respected the role being played by their subordinates: "'It seemed as though we were just lower-level people working through a problem we had worked through before'" (Conklin 1995:3). In fact

> [o]rganisations fail to achieve the required level of communication for effective TQM implementation because there is rarely a shared vision and middle managers, in an attempt to retain power, act as a communication block (Stevenson and Donnelly as cited in Harvey, 1995:23).

Quality as 'fitness for purpose': criticism of this principle emphasizes the fact that this definition of quality "focuses on minimum standards rather than striving for high standards of excellence" (Harvey 1995:23).

Focus on process: this principle fails to address the importance of outcomes and external results.

Minimize variation: TQM advocates that efficacy and efficiency is only possible when processes are standardized. The emphasis is on achieving defect-free, uniform products. While some administrative processes in higher education may benefit from this approach, it is difficult to see how it can be applied to teaching and learning. Standardization of the learning process "entirely disregards [its] exploratory nature"

(ibid.:27). More ominously, it leaves little room for flexibility and critical thinking. Is it desirable to aim for standardization of the 'products' of higher education (students) (Baldwin 1994)?

TQM is customer-driven: "The quality of any process is defined by the customers of that process" (Tribus undated:4). Customer-driven notions of quality can be problematic in higher education, particularly when the definition of a customer is constantly shifting. For example, can students be accurately described as customers when they are not passive recipients of a 'product' (their education)? To what extent are their parents customers, or employers, or society? At which point do all these stakeholders enter the discussion to define the quality of the process? TQM fails to provide answers to these questions. Harvey asserts that "[t]here is no evidence, for the vast majority of TQM organisations, that individual customers specify in advance what is required" (Harvey 1995:23). Others argue that shifting

> to a wholly customer-driven approach...simply trades one set of problems for another. To what extent can we rely on the expectations and requirements and requirements of students-as-customers as an indicator of quality? Will students...require, expect or 'delight' in courses that probe their thinking beyond familiar limits...? Will students, parents, potential employees be able to determine if a course or the instructor is effectively preparing them for subsequent courses? for the workplace? (Ruben as quoted in Cook 1996:5).

Clearly the model of a customer-driven approach is problematic. Universities would have to set priorities if they found themselves faced with conflicting customer needs. In industry, market values are used to prioritise competing needs. Higher education does not lend itself to easy determination of market values (Harvey 1995).

The customer-driven approach is further problematic when institutions of higher education enter into TQM partnerships with industry. This type of arrangement has been a feature of TQM in the US. Large corporations such as Du Pont, IBM and Ford have provided the necessary resources to implement TQM at several large research institutions. This arrangement serves industry in numerous ways: it drastically reduces the amount of money corporations need to invest in research and development since they are able to utilize the existing infrastructure in universities; new hirees

possess a range of skills which suit corporations thus minimising training costs (Bensimon 1995).

Other critiques of TQM have examined the discourse focusing in particular on TQM's industrial origins and what this implies for higher education. Dennis notes that, TQM "and its siblings, such as Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), have become the means by which public institutions of higher education have been reinscribed within a late 20th Century version of market logics" (Dennis 1995:1). Bensimon notes further that TQM is being touted, and accepted largely uncritically, as an approach to management and quality control which will rescue higher education "and transform it into a more efficient, customer-conscious, and productive system" (1995:594). It is higher education's mostly uncritical acceptance of TQM which arouses Bensimon's concern; a response which is uncharacteristic "given the academy's traditional contempt for business-oriented management approaches" (Pratt, 1994 and Veblen, 1918/1957 as cited, 1995:594). Dennis, however, remarks on the 'religious zeal' with which critics of TQM are attacked: "when an unbeliever questions the scope of the claims made on behalf of TQM, the indignation of the virtuous instantly manifests" (1996:10). Little wonder that the voices of opposition have been muted. This 'righteous indignation' reveals hostility to views which do not conform to the prevailing orthodoxy and could lead to the stigmatization of independent intellectual thought. Religious overtones are not the only hallmark of the language of TQM. Dennis, for example, draws attention to the use of war metaphors when the importance of the need to eliminate variation is emphasized. The implications of this trend for the development of new forms of knowledge are ominous.

There appear to be real concerns that TQM is a dangerous approach to quality assurance in higher education, as opposed to being merely 'inappropriate'. Critics are disturbed by the way "the evangelical and profit-oriented elements sit cheek by jowl with no apparent sense of incongruity" and the fact that

> a conceptual system based on quasi-religious faith and zeal can achieve widespread acceptance in institutions which are supposedly based on scepticism, questioning and scientific testing of evidence (Baldwin 1994:135).

5. Self- Regulation

Kells offers the following definition of *regulation*

> the informed and periodic process through which the system, institution, program or procedure is attuned over time to expectations (intentions, standards, norms) through choices and actions judged by the regulator(s) to be needed as a result of formative or summative evaluation. (Kells 1992:)

In a self-regulating system this process is carried out by higher education institutions either individually or in collaboration with each other. The role of the state is confined to ensuring that a limited number of "critical variables" in terms of quality remain within a tolerable range (Goedegebuure and van Vught 1994). In fact, Kells advocates that institutions should not waste time trying to define quality (personal communication). However, he emphasizes the need for self-regulation to take place within a "framework for evaluation" in which instruments and criteria for evaluation and feedback have been clearly defined (Kells 1993:8). Further important components are goals and written standards (system-wide or institutional).

The field of management sciences would describe self-regulation as the "cybernetic perspective on decision-making" (Ashby 1956 as cited in Goedegebuure and van Vught 1994:39). As a management strategy it is based on the notion that truly viable systems are able to regulate and organise themselves as long as "the feed-back loops are working and a repertory of operations is available" (Goedegebuure and van Vught 1994:40). Kells (1993) notes, however, that successful self-regulation relies on a culture of self-evaluation which takes many years to evolve.

Higher education institutions in the United States have a long history of self-regulation. Referred to as accreditation, the system was introduced in the late nineteenth century to regulate the large number of autonomous institutions which had been established. In the absence of a ministry of education at the national level, states were responsible for educational standards and practices and this led to unevenness and lack of uniformity (Lenn 1992). To pre-empt government control of an essentially chaotic situation, higher education institutions took it upon themselves to regulate the sector (van Vught 1994).

Accreditation has two fundamental purposes, namely the assessment of educational quality and the promotion of improvement which is achieved through peer review and self-evaluation. There is also a strong focus on goals and guild standards as determined by the institutions themselves and professional bodies (Lenn 1994).

The American experience shows that the following key features are essential to the success of self-regulation as a system of quality assurance:

- participation of key people so that there is 'ownership' of the process as well as the results;
- institutions (acting collaboratively) have to design and control the process through to implementation;
- effective peer review;
- resources for the process as well as to fund implementation of results;
- people trained to conduct evaluations.

The appeal of self-regulation for academics is that it allows them to enjoy a certain amount of professional autonomy in quality assessment through self-evaluation. The role of the State in a self-regulated system is limited to monitoring performance in relation to goals and standards. The State can also determine the broad parameters for quality and reserves the right to intervene when institutions do not produce satisfactory results (Goedegebuure and van Vught 1994).

5.1 Self-evaluation

Within a self-regulating system, institutional self-evaluation (ISE–also called institutional self-assessment) is central. ISE is the process whereby an institution assembles information about itself, evaluates its performance in relation to its stated goals and proposes corrective measures to address any problems which have been identified. This can be done at the programme level or can be focused on specific activities, namely, teaching and learning, or research. In quality assurance, ISE develops an institution's ability to be self-critical and to reflect on its activities. It has been argued that this is the key to "[r]eal and enduring quality" which cannot be achieved if it is only imposed from the outside (Frazer 1992:18). As with self-regulation, self-evaluation requires key elements to be successful; paramount among

these elements is ownership of the process, which is achieved by securing the participation of key people, as well as ownership of the results. Feedback on the self-evaluation comes from the 'mirror' held up by peer review of the outcome of the self-evaluation. At the institutional level the feedback can be in the form of a report which is presented after a visit by peers. At the programme level, feedback would come from peers within the institution who are charged with evaluating the outcome of the self-evaluation.

6. Structures for assessing the quality of higher education

Since the mid-1980s, many countries have established structures to assess the quality of higher education institutions and programmes using the methods described earlier in this chapter. This section will give a brief overview of models which are currently in use in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. These two examples have been chosen because of their influence on the South African debate about an appropriate approach to quality assurance and on the ultimate form of a new quality assurance mechanism for South African higher education which is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

6.1 The Netherlands

University programmes in the Netherlands are subject to external quality assessment which is carried out by a team of peers who visit the institutions every five or six years. The external quality assessment system is managed by the Association of the Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU). This system was implemented in 1986 and allowed the two sectors of higher education, namely the polytechnics and the universities, to establish systems which were compatible with the features of each respective sector. The universities chose comparative quality assessment of programmes which would be conducted by a visiting team of peers and would result in reports made available to the public (Kalkwijk 1992). The focus on programmes entails cyclical evaluation of disciplinary fields. The visiting teams consist of seven members and include a foreign expert in the discipline as well as an educational expert. All the programmes in a particular discipline are not evaluated at the same time, so the remainder of the team is made up of peers from non-participating

programmes whose names have been put forward by the participating programmes and who are nominated by the VSNU (Maassen 1995).

The evaluating committee's visits last for two to two-and-a-half days during which time issues are explored which have been raised in a report on a self-evaluation which had been conducted prior to (and for) the visit. Guidelines prepared by the VSNU constitute the framework of the self-evaluation which should include information on

> the objectives of the discipline, the linkage with secondary education, the arrangements for the first year selection phase, ... the doctoral programme, the efficiency and real duration of study, faculty and staff available, teaching and laboratory facilities, and the internal quality system. (Kalkwijk 1992:101)

Issues which arise in the self-evaluation are then discussed in meetings held with relevant members of the faculty as well as with students. Any other issues which may arise during the course of the visit are explored as well.

External quality assessment in the Dutch universities is aimed at: improving the quality of academic programmes through self-assessment; self-regulation both within institutions and system-wide; providing accountability by making the results of the system public (Vroeijenstijn 1992). Universities enjoy a fair amount of autonomy and government steers from a distance via evaluation of the EQA process by the Inspectorate for Higher education. The Dutch Ministry of Education and Science has agreed that the outcome of this 'meta-evaluation' will not lead to any punitive action on its part. There is consensus that there should be no direct links between funding and assessment as this would result in compliant behaviour on the part of the universities and would undermine the whole quality assessment process (Maassen 1995). The current practice does, however, present a dilemma, namely, "Without the expectation of real consequences, the incentives to organize quality assessment are lacking; with the expectation of real consequences, quality assessment will turn into a power game" (Westerheijden 1990, quoted in Maassen 1995:77). For this reason, the Ministry of Education and Science has indicated that, in the future, it *may* take action if the universities take too long to effect satisfactory improvements.

6.2 The United Kingdom

Universities in the United Kingdom have adapted the principles of financial audit for the purposes of quality assurance. It has been the responsibility initially of the Academic Audit Unit (AAU) and later of the Division of Quality Audit of the Higher Education Quality Council, to "provide external and independent assurance that UK universities have adequate and effective mechanisms and structures for monitoring, maintaining and improving the quality of their teaching" (Williams 1992:141).

The term 'audit' was originally chosen for two reasons: to distinguish the process from other types of peer review, and to send out a message about the proposed methodology for this new form of external academic evaluation. Thus, like a financial audit, the process would focus on documented systems and procedures within institutions and would proceed, in detailed discussion with staff and students, to establish whether institutional practice with respect to quality assurance was effective and whether an institution was able to achieve its goals and objectives through the application of such practice (Webb 1994).

This approach was adopted in view of the diversity of UK higher education. In terms of the charters and private acts by which UK universities were established, they had traditionally been responsible for their own standards. Peer review in the form of the external examining system played a large role in quality assurance but other formal mechanisms of quality assurance for teaching and learning were absent. There existed a high degree of institutional autonomy which led to criticisms that the universities were "unaccountable, unresponsive, non-relevant, badly managed, and generally ill-fitted to meet the needs of the new entrepreneurial world" (Williams 1992:142). The audit process was cognisant of institutional diversity hence its focus on quality management systems.

In addition to drawing on the principles of financial audits, the AAU incorporated the procedures of the Council of National Academic Awards, which had been responsible for validation and accreditation in the polytechnics prior to the removal of the binary line, and the ideas of total quality management. From the CNAA was taken the practice of cyclical reviews conducted by peers based on detailed written information

on all aspects of a given programme which had been prepared by the institution under review. The influence of total quality management could be seen in the importance assigned to "customer (students and employers) satisfaction, staff training and development of quality, and the idea that the quality of higher education is dependent on the totality of an institution's activities" (Maassen 1995:79).

The AAU did not seek to impose on universities the idea that there was a single set of procedures which had to be followed in order to assure the quality of its activities. On the contrary, audit teams were expected "to bring an open, non-prescriptive perspective to each institutional audit and to review arrangements for quality assurance agnostically" (Webb 1994:47). The audit process contained elements of the Dutch system in that it was conducted by a team of peers which visited an institution for the purposes of evaluation and its evaluation was based on a self-study prepared for the visit. However, while the Dutch assessment focused on the programme itself, the UK model was essentially a 'meta-evaluation' because of its focus on an institution's mechanisms for assuring and monitoring quality and the intention was to assess the efficacy of those mechanisms. The quality audit was also meant to have a developmental role in that evidence of good practice would disseminated among the universities.

The AAU was subsumed into the Division of Quality Audit which fell within the Higher Education Quality Council when that body was established in 1992 by the heads of all UK higher education institutions. The establishment of the HEQC followed the 1991 White Paper *Higher Education: A New Framework.* The White Paper's proposals for restructuring higher and further education led to fundamental changes in the system-wide procedures for quality assurance: provision was made for separate agencies which would audit and assess higher education institutions; assessment of the quality of teaching would be tied to funding (Maassen 1995).

There have been subsequent developments: in late 1997 a new structure was proposed to carry out quality assurance with the purpose of facilitating, in the first place, 'continuous quality improvement'. However, the proposals retain aspects of the previous system, notably that the purposes of a quality assurance is to demonstrate

accountability, to inform the public about the quality and standards of institutions and programmes, and that any problems regarding unacceptable programmes will be addressed without delay (Doherty 1997). Quality assurance in the United Kingdom is in a constant state of flux mainly due to the imposition of procedures which have "sown seeds of confusion across the whole sector" (Webb 1994:58). It remains to be seen what will be the impact of the new quality assurance agency.

7. Conclusion

The discussion of methods of quality assurance in this chapter tells us that higher education continues to be buffeted by several forces: the state, the market (which includes industry and 'customers'–current and future students and their parents) and the academy. The academy is alarmed, for example, by the importation–sometimes wholesale–of quality assurance methods which have been demonstrably successful in the business sector because it fears that its core values are likely to be eroded. Quality assurance mechanisms, therefore, have to be "broadly compatible with the culture of higher education institutions" (Maassen 1995: 64). It could, for example, be argued that the very quality which is so hard to measure could be sacrificed if higher education institutions succumbed to the onslaught of Total Quality Management–an approach which "clearly challenge[s] academic norms" (ibid.:66). Performance indicators can be useful but have a limited role because they are unable to accurately represent crucial aspects of the teaching and learning process which are 'measured' for quality assurance purposes. Worse, the use of performance indicators for the purpose of ranking institutions often results in misinterpretation and can damage institutional reputations, which brings us back to a method which is firmly grounded in the academy and which allows academics the room to design procedures for assessing the quality of their activities largely on their own terms: self-evaluation complemented by peer review. However, demands for accountability in higher education are unlikely to abate and self-regulation can be interpreted as 'closing ranks' on the part of the universities. In order to demonstrate accountability, higher education institutions will need to be explicit about criteria for (self-)evaluation and will need to expand the definition of peers to include other stakeholders thereby

indicating that there is a willingness to hear other voices in discussions about quality in higher education.

CHAPTER THREE : QUALITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

This chapter looks at developments with respect to quality assurance in South African higher education. Beginning with early attempts to address quality in the university sector, the chapter describes how universities functioned in the apartheid state, traces the trajectory of discussions on quality assurance since the early 1990s through the various policy investigations and commissions which addressed higher education and culminates in the establishment of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) under the auspices of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) of the South African Universities' Vice-Chancellors' Association (SAUVCA). In addition, the appropriateness of the model adopted in South Africa is explored in conversation with a leading contributor to discussions on policy models for higher education and with a member of the QPU Management Board.

1. South African universities : diverse origins, diverse cultures

At the beginning of 1987, an investigation was launched into "Macro-aspects of the University within the context of Tertiary Education in South Africa". The investigation was the universities' response to a call in 1986 from the then Minister of Education, F W de Klerk, to rationalize higher education as de Klerk was concerned about inefficiencies in the system. At that time South Africa's tertiary education sector comprised twenty-one universities which could be categorized roughly as: the predominantly white English-medium 'open' universities (Cape Town, Rhodes, Natal, the Witwatersrand), white Afrikaans-medium universities (Pretoria, Stellenbosch, Rand Afrikaans University, University of the Orange Free State, Potchefstroom), 'ethnic' universities (Durban-Westville, University of the Western Cape, Medunsa, Zululand), TBVC universities (Fort Hare, Transkei, the North, Bophutatswana, Venda), non-residential (the University of South Africa and Vista University) and the dual-medium University of Port Elizabeth. The categories serve both to reveal the historical origins and to illustrate the fractured nature of university education in South

Africa. On the other hand, they conceal other differences (hence the qualification that they are 'rough'). Vista University, for example, could also be described as an 'ethnic' institution since it was established for African students (Dreijmanis 1988). The University of Fort Hare was not originally established for any particular ethnic group (although very few white students were educated there) and drew its student body from all over South Africa as well as other parts of Africa. It is not surprising then, that the government's decision in 1960 to limit its enrolment to Xhosa-speaking South Africans was strenuously opposed on the grounds that "its international character would be undermined" (ibid.:33).

At a conference on the role of the universities in South Africa held at the University of Cape Town in 1976, Viljoen, rector of RAU, Chair of the Broederbond and later cabinet minister, asserted that "the role of the Afrikaans university is to be a good, and if this does not sound presumptuous, an excellent university, according to the universally accepted standards of what this means" (1977:172). At the same time, however, Afrikaans-medium universities saw themselves as "volksuniversiteite, linked to the ideology of volksnasionalisme" and as serving the needs of the 'volk' "whose spritual and cultural well-being depends very heavily upon the efforts and achievements of the Afrikaans-medium universities" (Degenaar 1977 as cited in Dreijmanis 1988:17, and Viljoen 1977:172). In contrast, the overwhelmingly white English-medium universities were considered 'open' in that their tendency was "to view themselves as open communities of scholars dedicated to the search for truth" (Dreijmanis 1988:17). At the same conference, G R Bozzoli, Vice-Chancellor of Wits, noted that the English-language universities

> regard themselves as having a relationship with their own community ... and generally regard their community as the people who are likely and able to attend the university as students, or whose lives and environments are or could be influenced by the university .... In most cases this means the people who are geographically located around or near the university, irrespective of their race or colour (1977:193).

(The English-language universities offered some resistance to government restrictions and to a limited extent–i.e., within the confines of apartheid policy–were able to assert their right to who they could teach; admission was always 'open' to those with a matric exemption and the financial means to undertake university study (File 1986).)

Because of this far broader definition of 'volk', Bozzoli argued strongly that it was incumbent on this group to "engage the best possible staffs, as measured on a world scale" and also made the observation that "the real role of all universities should be the same, namely education at tertiary level in the best possible sense" (1977:190).

Two groups can be combined by virtue of having a common founding philosophy on the part of the government: the 'ethnic' universities and those which were located in the self-governing 'independent' states of Transkei, Bophutatswana, Venda and Ciskei. With the exception of Fort Hare, all these institutions were created to cater for (non-white) sections of South Africa's population who shared either a common language or a common 'culture'. With no apparent irony, Stimie and Geggus noted in 1972

> When the new dispensation for the education of Non-White groups was put into effect, there were many misgivings in many quarters, much derision, much talk of "inferior standards", "tribal colleges", "academic freedom" supposed to have been violated and such, but the new universities stand firmly on their own feet, are autonomous within themselves ... maintain high academic standards and render a service to their peoples which no other institutions can render as effectively. The future with all its challenges lies ahead, but they have reason to face it with confidence and hope (1972:30).

Clearly the issue of academic standards was never far from anyone's mind as is shown by Viljoen's defensive assertion on the role of Afrikaans-medium universities and Stimie and Geggus' dismissal of criticism heaped on the 'ethnic' institutions. Furthermore, it was inevitable that duplication would occur on many levels within a segregated and unequal sector–one could not call it a 'higher education system': governance of universities was fragmented, institutional development had been uneven and their objectives were vastly different. The state only became concerned about the structural inequalities generated by apartheid higher education when it could no longer sustain existing levels of support in the university sector.

2. Early attempts at addressing quality

The Minister of Education's request that rationalization in higher education be investigated was addressed at the Universities and Technikons Advisory Council

(AUT), a 'buffer body' which had both an advisory role with respect to the Minister (although he retained the right to make the final decision) and represented the interests of universities and technikons. Specifically, the Minister wished the AUT to address the extent to which: services were duplicated; certain disciplines produced too many graduates; institutions were continuing to offer courses with low enrolments and low success rates. The universities, on the other hand, wished to retain the initiative in a rationalization exercise and conveyed this intention to the Minister through the Committee of University Principals (CUP), a statutory body representing their interests. The CUP launched its investigation into "Macro-aspects of the University within the context of Tertiary Education in South Africa" at the beginning of 1987. The report was released in December 1987.

On the question of standards, the CUP found that there was a great variation in the quality of teaching and research at South Africa's universities and suggested that it "should institute guidelines for the maintenance and improvement of standards" (CUP 1987:113). The report noted that "the highest standards are achieved in a situation where autonomous universities regulate themselves in terms of internationally accepted norms" (ibid.:91) .

The role of accreditation at the tertiary level was raised in the report, insofar as it could facilitate the evaluation of the standard of teaching according to specific criteria as well as encourage institutional self-evaluation. Finally the report made several recommendations regarding the maintenance of standards, *inter alia*, that peer evaluation of teaching staff should be encouraged; that more institutions should adopt the system of external examiners (as a form of peer evaluation, its use was selective across the system); and that "adequate facilities [would] be a prequisite ... to attain and maintain excellence" (ibid.:100).

The report confirmed that there was a need for rationalization and the CUP resolved that this should be initiated and managed by the university sector. The rationalization exercise would have two goals: elimination of overlap (at institutional level–conducted by universities themselves–as well as system-wide) and the establishment of 'centres of excellence'. It was around this latter goal that the CUP

expressed its intention in 1988 to examine the quality of academic programmes and the reviews were begun with two 'pilot studies' of Surveying and Librarianship. At no stage in the report, or thereafter, was quality defined. Bunting (1993) contends that the CUP had been concerned mainly with achieving efficiency through rationalization and it appears that the CUP equated 'quality' with efficiency and thus if efficiency was achieved, then quality/excellence would follow. He notes further that the CUP had also not defined what it meant by efficiency.

3. Autonomy and Accountability in apartheid higher education

Up until the time when government had begun to express concerns about the need for cost-effectiveness in the university sector, South African institutions of higher education had never been called to account for expenditure of state funds. In fact, prior to 1994, South Africa's English and Afrikaans medium, white universities were relatively free from state interference in financial and academic policies. The state imposed restrictions on student selection by insisting that those previously classified as Black, Indian and Coloured seek the Minister of Education's permission to enrol for certain subject areas at the 'open' universities.

The state hardly curtailed administrative autonomy of the universities, although the legal framework within which universities operated (the general Universities act, No 61 of 1955 as amended, as well as individual university statutes) limited their activities in the following ways:

- the state determined the minimum entrance requirement for admission to degree studies;
- the establishment of new faculties, departments, diploma and degree programmes had to be approved by the Minister of Education who also laid down curricula and admission criteria for new degrees and diplomas;
- ministerial approval had to be sought when universities wished to dispose of capital assets (Bunting 1994).

The above constraints aside, universities enjoyed a high degree of financial autonomy and were relatively well-resourced despite the state's rumblings in 1986 about duplication of degree programmes (File 1986).

It is also important to add that, as far as the state was concerned, universities did not enjoy autonomy by right. On the contrary, they had been granted "a measure of autonomy by the state for *reasons of administrative efficiency alone"* (emphasis in original, Bunting 1994:24). In fact, the universities were at the receiving end of contradictory government policy: a 'hands-off' approach to white institutions and tight control of the 'ethnic' universities (Bunting 1998). However, the law stipulated that the state was formally responsible for education: universities could only exert influence on national policy through 'buffer and interest bodies' which had distinct roles in the management of higher education: the Minister called on them mainly for advice. Thus the Commitee of University Principals merely constituted an interest body which had as one of its primary functions the promotion of co-operation among South Africa's universities and maintenance of a "minimum degree of order" (Department of National Education as quoted in Bunting 1994:25). Because the CUP had no formal statutory responsibility for higher education, it was eventually unable to enforce compliance with its recommendations regarding the programmes in Librarianship and Surveying.

Another significant aspect of higher education in pre-1994 South Africa was that direct accountability to the state did not exist: universities could largely determine overall institutional policy and direction through their Senates and Councils. Criteria for accountability were not laid down by the Department of National Education (Bunting 1994). On these terms, therefore, one could not speak of a 'system' of higher education. In any event, the seventeen universities established in South Africa were responsible to four independent ministeries of Education and the four established in the TBVC states reported to their respective 'governments'.

4. Developments in Quality Assurance since 1992

4.1 Issues confronting higher education institutions in the 1990s

As we have seen earlier in this study, the issue of quality in higher education has arisen in the context of rapidly increasing student numbers as a result of widening access to university study and concerns that the quality of educational provision would suffer. In South Africa, as in other parts of the world where the state is responsible for

providing most of the funding for higher education, universities are expected to do more with less. Countries at the mercy of international lending institutions are especially vulnerable: the World Bank has argued that "increasing ... financial support to the end of improving quality [is not a] viable option", that publicly-funded institutions of higher education have to diversify their sources of support and reduce reliance on the State (Hebert 1993:6). In fact, the Bank sees its role as exerting influence on governments to scale down their financial commitment to higher education. Universities are thus confronted with the prospect of declining levels of state support while the traditional argument is made "that quantity is always at the expense of quality, and that democracy is always at the expense of excellence" (Mamdani 1995:24). While one might reject the traditional argument, particularly the latter half, Moodie (1992) has observed that it is precisely the lack of resources which gives rise to difficult choices. He notes, for example, that since the 'open' universities began to actively recruit and enroll students who are under-prepared for university study, they have had to invest considerable financial and staffing resources in academic development programmes to address perceived deficiencies and to ensure that such students are successful. More often than not, under-prepared students are enrolled in extended programmes, which means that they will take longer to finish their degrees–"time too is a scarce resource" (ibid.:2).

The problem is magnified at what are now called the Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) which were established by the apartheid state after the Extension of University Education Act was promulgated in 1959. The majority of these institutions were created over a period of twenty years to cater specifically for people classified Black (African–this includes the three institutions established in the 'self-governing states' of Transkei, Bophutatswana, Venda and the University of Fort Hare which found itself in the Ciskei), Coloured and Indian. As a result of government policy during the last thirty years, these institutions have been under-funded relative to the eleven 'favoured' predominantly white institutions. The application of the subsidy formula introduced in 1986 also contributed to funding inequalities (see Bunting 1994 for examples).

In an attempt to meet the growing need for access to higher education, several of the HDIs took on large numbers of school leavers during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The consequence of this policy has been unmanageably high student:staff ratios, very little time for staff to engage in research, libraries straining under the burden of large student numbers. These problems are compounded by the fact that the majority of their students have been at the receiving end of gross disadvantage with respect to their schooling and their home environments and the minority have a good grounding in the medium of instruction at university (for the rest, they are having to grasp a new discipline and a new way of acquiring knowledge in their third or fourth language). The universities themselves are experiencing pressure on their resources, often as a result of large student debt, "making it impossible for HBUs [Historically Black Universities] to provide the facilities, level of support, effective mediation of learning and other academic development initiatives, on a scale large enough to make a significant impact on student learning in the short term" (Baijnath undated:1). In these circumstances, it is hard to avoid deterioration in the quality of the students' learning experience.

How, then, does one arrive at a system of quality assurance which takes into account the diverse conditions which exist within the South African context? Many contributors to the discussion in South Africa have addressed the need for a quality assurance system which encompasses issues of redress as well as 'quality maintenance'. It is important to note that HDIs were originally sceptical about the motives behind the sudden interest in quality assurance and they were wary of joining the discussion, particularly when it appeared as if rationalization would be a by-product of quality assurance. (The CUP had 'ranked' institutions as part of its rationalization exercise during the 1980s and HDIs consistently appeared at the bottom of the tables.) They feared that, by virtue of the reputed quality of their programmes relative to those of the better resourced institutions, they were likely to be the losers in any process of rationalization. It did not help that, "in some quarters a view was publicly expressed that HDIs would become Colleges of Education with the sole purpose of conducting bridging programmes" (Noruwana 1996:26).

4.2 The National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI)

Given the fragmented state of higher education at the advent of the new political dispensation, it is not surprising, therefore, that great emphasis was placed on the need for a co-ordinated and unitary system which would address apartheid education's legacy of structural inequalities in the sector. This issue was addressed two years before the ANC-led Government of National Unit was installed by the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) which had begun to lay the groundwork for the new education system by producing policy options for a unitary system: post-secondary education was one of the sectors which received attention in this exercise. The NEPI Report on Post-Secondary Education (PSE) noted that the system was hamstrung in several crucial ways and that this presented major challenges to the architects of a transformed system, namely, a model which lacked legitimacy because of the distinction between 'own' and 'general' affairs as well as institutional and staffing inequalities. Furthermore, there was a need to widen access across the system and to focus development on certain sectors within higher education which previously had been neglected, such as research output and the areas of science and technology. Finally, this had to be achieved while maintaining and enhancing quality. In this respect, the NEPI report identified the two most important issues in respect of quality in higher education, namely,

- how can the demands of equity be made consistent with South Africa's need for a PSE system of high quality?
- how can the development needs of the country be met if priority is given to the elimination of inequalities in the PSE system? (NEPI 1992:58).

These two questions are the nub of the discussion about quality in South African higher education. As Moodie (1992:3) has pointed out, access and quality cannot be achieved without resources, an element which is seldom made explicit but which has to be brought into the discussion.

4.3 Investigating the Use of Performance Indicators

In looking for useful models of quality assurance, South Africans have explored several approaches which have been developed internationally. One example is the use of performance indicators which the Education Policy Unit at the University of the

Western Cape approached as a research project which was initiated in 1994. The EPU's aim was to develop "a framework for a revised management information system (MIS) and a set of performance indicators (PIs) for Higher Education (HE)" (Kulati and Mosdell 1996:97). The research project culminated in a National Workshop which drew its participants from South African HE stakeholders and experts as well as international contributors who, in association with EPU staff, presented position papers which had been commissioned by the EPU.

The project took into consideration unique aspects of the South African context, namely, the limitations of the existing South African Post-Secondary Education Information System (SAPSE) as well as fundamental and rapid changes in the socio-political environment which were shaping the development of policy options for higher education (for example, the government's Reconstruction and Development Programme, the National Education Bill, No 4 of 1995). [It is important to note that the current use of performance indicators in higher education can be traced back to the early 1980s when they began to be used systematically to monitor developments in systems experiencing rapid change in respect of student numbers, downward pressures on funding, and other factors associated with expansion and transformation in a short period of time (Neocosmos *et al* 1995).]

Another problem, at the time, was that clarity in terms of the system's goals had not been achieved which made it difficult to arrive at procedures which could be tailored to the system's needs. Nevertheless, participants in the project agreed that the White Papers on Reconstruction and Development (1994) and on Education and Training (1995) provided sufficient guidance in terms of boad principles upon which they could base their investigations. These were the need to address issues of equity with respect to the provision of education and training and the need to promote national development through the higher education system. Thus any system of performance indicators would need to be able to monitor progress toward the twin goals of equity and development.

The investigation revealed what had been learned in several countries which used performance indicators: that their usefulness was limited to a supporting role in, as

opposed to the sole basis of, decision-making - qualitative judgments were necessary to compliment numerical indicators; crucial activities in higher education could not be reduced to numerical indicators; that all stakeholders had to agree on how they would be used in order for them to have legitimacy. The needs of higher education in South Africa could be met with performance indicators which were developed mainly for purposes of monitoring, *inter alia*

> progress towarding meeting national development goals, ... changes in the size, shape and profile of the Higher Education system over time in relation to specific goals related to equity and redress. ... the efficiency and effectiveness of the Higher Education system and the financial health of institutions in a period of transition. ... quality and academic standards. ... the quality and effectiveness of institutional governance and management in order to ensure accountability (Kulati and Mosdell 1996:106).

With respect to quality assurance, the project distinguished between the use of performance indicators at a national and at an institutional level, noting that needs at each respective would be different. Performance indicators developed for the higher education sector would need to measure progress towards system-wide goals. More importantly, however, a standard set of indicators is necessary "so that the data elements from the various institutions measure the same things" (ibid.:107). At the institutional level, performance indicators would assist an institution in measuring the extent to which it has met the goals of its Mission Statement.

As noted earlier, the project also looked at developing the framework for a National Management Information System–an essential prerequisite for setting up a national set of performance indicators–which is still not in place. The current system has the following limitations: it is difficult for the layperson to grasp and/or manipulate for the purposes of institutional management; developed for the institutions which previously were administered by the House of Assembly, it is tainted by its apartheid past and thus lacking in credibility; it is unable to generate data which would be suitable for monitoring the important twin goals of equity and development; most critically, because the SAPSE reports and related documentation "are not user friendly", reporting to interested parties or stakeholders is difficult, if not impossible (Bunting 1997, Kulati and Mosdell 1996:102). Until SAPSE is radically overhauled or replaced by a national management information system which has been devised in

consultation with the major players in higher education and which enjoys legitimacy, it will be impossible to develop performance indicators for the purposes of quality assurance in South Africa (Bunting 1997).

5. Mechanisms of Quality Assurance

Quality assurance in South African higher education is now being explored in a context vastly different from the one in which the CUP had tried to address quality through rationalization. South African universities are now all part of a single co-ordinated higher education system. With respect to quality, one of the principles of the new system, the draft White Paper states that:

> The pursuit of the principle of quality means maintaining and applying academic and educational standards, both in the sense of specific expectations and requirements that should be complied with and in the sense of ideals of excellence that should be aimed at. These expectations and ideals can differ from context to context, partly depending on the specific purposes pursued. Applying the principle of quality entails evaluating services and products against set standards, with a view to improvement, renewal or progress. (White Paper on Higher Education 1997:13)

This has been translated into a system of quality assurance, largely drawn from the continental European approach, which devolves responsibility for assuring quality to higher education institutions within a general framework designed by the government. The universities are left to "elaborate the details themselves" (Maassen 1995:71). Within the South African system, this will be done through the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) which will be the higher education sector's national authority for quality assurance and promotion within the National Qualifications Framework, which is administered by the South African Qualifications Authority. At the same time, the HEQC will be responsible for programme accreditation and institutional audits "within an agreed framework underpinned by:

- the formulation of criteria and procedures in consultation with higher education institutions;
- a formative notion of quality assurance, focused on improvement and development rather than punitive sanction;
- a mix of institutional self-evaluation and external independent assessment (White Paper on Higher Education 1997:21)".

The idea of a Higher Education Quality Committee was first mooted by the National Commission on Higher Education which, in 1995, had been given the task of developing policies which would bring about fundamental restructuring in the higher education sector. The NCHE's report, *A Framework for Transformation*, was released in 1996. With respect to quality assurance, the NCHE presented the case for a "comprehensive development-oriented focused ... system [as] central to a single co-ordinated higher education system [and] essential to tackle differences in quality across institutional programmes" (NCHE:108).

5.1 The National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

An integral part of the quality assurance system is the development of a single qualifications framework for higher education which will fit into the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which has been established for education and training in its entirety (South African Qualifications Authority Act 58 of 1995).

> The establishment of the NQF is predicated on the concept of lifelong learning which depends critically on the notion that the educational advancement of individuals can and should proceed through the continual integration in each person of a mix of formal and informal educational experiences, for which there should be a maximum of opportunities (Gevers 1996:188).

In addition, the context for the establishment of an NQF is the definition of the higher education system as programme based, i.e., it is conceived of as comprising instructional programmes at various levels to which access can be gained (by virtue of prior learning--formal and non-formal--being recognised) or from which the individual can exit having the desired qualification. This type of 'qualification acquisition' is best achieved in a system envisaged as "a range of institutions offering qualifications at particular levels, and of particular institutions offering qualifications at multiple levels" (NCHE 1996:106-107). All programmes offered in the sector would be registered with the NQF, at least at exit level of whole qualifications. National Standards Setting Bodies have the task of ensuring that the ladder of qualifications is coherent and that it will facilitate articulation between institutions and qualifications (Cloete 1997).

The work of the NQF had been delayed by the debate as to whether universities would be able to register whole qualifications, which the universities prefer. As in New Zealand, which is one of the models for South Africa's qualifications framework, universities have been strongly opposed to breaking down qualifications into unit standards for the purposes of articulation on the grounds that "[e]ducational activities in a higher education system can best be planned, operated and maintained as defined *programmes* leading to the acquisition of general qualifications in different fields" (Gevers 1998a). More importantly, quality assurance at the level of whole qualifications, as opposed to units, is preferable as it is a way of ensuring programme coherence. Five years after the NQF was adopted, New Zealand was faced with a choice, i.e., whether to adopt the model based on unit standards or whether to choose a framework which is more comprehensive and inclusive (Irwin 1997). A compromise has been reached which will accommodate qualifications in three categories: 'whole qualifications', others comprised solely of unit standards as well as qualifications with and without unit standards.

The current situation in South Africa is that SAQA has agreed that university qualifications can be registered (i) as whole qualifications with outcomes as stipulated by the NQF and (ii) in unit standard-based form. Gevers (1998a) is confident that this will neither hinder effective progression through the Higher Education Band (levels 5 to 8) nor prevent articulation and that the overall objectives of the NQF can be achieved. The quality of programmes would be monitored by the Education and Training Quality Authority for higher education which is likely to be the Higher Education Quality Council of the Council on Higher Education. The establishment of the HEQC is imminent.

5.2 The Role of Professional Boards and Councils

It would not be true to say that quality assurance mechanisms have been entirely absent from the university sector. Statutory professional councils for engineering, accounting, the law, the various branches of medicine and in the sciences have always defined minimum standards for competency in the relevant profession. The mechanisms include board examinations (over and above final university

examinations), approval of curricula and salary subvention (du Plessis and Gous 1993). The Engineering Council for South Africa (ECSA) also accredits university programmes based on evaluations which are conducted every five years.

5.3 The Quality Promotion Unit of the South African Universities' Vice-Chancellors' Association

Cognisant of international developments in quality assurance in higher education, the CUP began in 1993 to consider ways in which South African universities should address this issue. The CUP recognized that it was unlikely that universities would continue to operate in a system where they enjoyed a large degree of autonomy and low accountability. Rather than waiting to see which system of quality assurance the state would impose, the universities agreed that it would be in their interests to be proactive as this would also enable them to have ownership of the system (Brink 1996). There is a more cynical view: that the QPU was established to ward off ministerial and political influence in the universities (Bunting 1998). Whatever the CUP's motives, a system of quality assurance initiated and designed by the universities (but which made provision for external input) could reassure a potentially interventionist state that the universities were prepared to take responsibility for the quality of the system.

The CUP's Education Committee held a seminar in 1993 at which it was unanimously agreed that a quality assurance for South African universities should have the following requirements:

- "it should have a dual purpose: quality assurance and quality improvement.
- it should be institution-centred rather than governmental or comparative.
- it should have internal and external dimensions (self-assessment and external visitors).
- self-assessment should be the cornerstone.
- the measures of quality should be general consensual attributes of quality, achievement or stated institutional or programme goals, value-addedness, all in context.
- the system should be regular and cyclical.
- it should be comprehensive in regard to academic and administrative functions in institutions.

- visits should be made by impartial, widely experienced and responsible peers, amongst whom should be lay citizens or industry representatives not drawn from the university system.
- the specific results of the studies and visits should be confidential to the quality promotion system and the institution concerned.
- there should not be a direct link between quality audit and the funding of institutions by government.
- government or other agencies should provide assurance to the public by agreeing to the nature of the process and by responsibly using summary statements about the status of the system and its programmes" (CUP 1994)

The above requirements were enshrined in the proposal for the establishment of a Quality Promotion Unit which was adopted by the CUP (later the South African Universities' Vice-Chancellors' Association (SAUVCA)) in January 1995.

The QPU is managed by a Board which is a specialist Committee of SAUVCA and oversees a panel of Quality Review Specialists (± 30 members), the QPU Directorate (Director, Deputy Director and administrative support) and a Quality Promotion Group (an informal group of university nominees who work with the QPU Board "to develop policies and materials for the QPU audits, ... bring information on quality assurance to their institutions, and ... assist in developing quality assurance practice there") (QPU 1997).

The quality assurance system proposed by the QPU draws on international experience, reflecting in particular systems which comprise initially an institutional self-evaluation followed by an external assessment of the results–usually by peers. Peers need not be confined to people drawn from the university sector but also includes other stakeholders, notably, the state, business and relevant professionals.

The QPU has been careful to stress that its emphasis is on "Quality *promotion* and not quality *assessment*, quality *assurance* or quality *control*'" (Brink 1996). Gevers (1998c) has noted that the architects of the QPU were keen to avoid past mistakes. Here he was referring specifically to the CUP's investigations into disciplines: based on the performance indicators which the CUP used, programmes at the HDIs were placed consistently at the bottom of the rankings. Furthermore, universities have

deliberately steered clear of terms which might imply that there is a punitive dimension to the system. This particular aspect 'sold' the HDIs on the QPU's approach to quality assurance because it is strongly developmental, taking into consideration the existing "[i]nequities and severe backlogs [which] are a striking feature of the institutional landscape" (Gevers 1998c, QPU 1996a).

The QPU has been mindful "that an unplanned and or (sic) uncoordinated programme will surely be counter-productive in that destruction of morale and capacity may occur where the opposite effect is the intention" (QPU 1996a). The QPU's premise is that no institution is perfect, that there will always been room for improvement (Gevers 1998c). Thus an institution's performance will be assessed in relation to its Mission Statement and goals and in this first phase of its work, the QPU's primary purpose is to conduct an audit of quality assurance practices at universities. The audit panel comprises academic and administrative staff drawn from the universities, a representative from industry as well as international expert, will visit institutions to assess the efficacy and appropriateness of quality assurance mechanisms which have been developed by the institutions themselves. The audit is based on an institutional self-evaluation conducted within a framework of guidelines provided by the QPU and are meant to be "user-friendly [and] non-judgmental" (QPU 1996b).

Subsequent to the audit an interim report is considered by the Board of the QPU whereafter an approved draft is released to the audited institution for comment. The institution's comments are fed back to the QPU, the report is finalised and submitted to the QPU Management Board for adoption. Other universities may have access to the final reports on application to the QPU, although the reports are not meant to be disseminated in the media. In this way, institutions will be able to share examples of good practice with the aim of promoting quality within the system. Later the QPU's emphasis will shift to programme evaluation (SAUVCA 1997). The sequential approach is important because it is an inexpensive way to launch quality assurance system-wide and it prepares institutions for the eventual shift to programme evaluation.

5.4 An assessment of the QPU's Institutional Audits

The QPU has chosen to focus initially on institutional audits for the following reasons:

- at this stage resources(human and financial) are not available to support programme evaluation which would be much wider in scope;
- "[t]he SAUVCA viewpoint is that an institutional approach will have **maximum impact** on institutions in establishing and fostering a culture of quality" (emphasis in original)(ibid.:3));
- institutional audits will "strengthen and balance" work currently undertaken by professional councils (ibid.);
- the focus of the audits will be the "**mechanisms** and **procedures**" which institutions have in place as opposed to "the **quality *per se***" of institutional activities (although SAUVCA concedes that it is likely that "an audit panel inevitably will sometimes indirectly make judgements on the quality of some areas of an institution's functioning" (ibid.:4).

By September 1998, the QPU had conducted seven institutional audits. The audits of the Universities of Port Elizabeth and Rhodes University which took place early in 1997 were considered 'pilots' and preceded fully-fledged audits of the Universities of Pretoria and Zululand (mid- and late October 1997, respectively), the University of the Western Cape (March 1998), the University of Venda (May 1998) and Medunsa (August 1998). At the time of writing, Final Audit Reports on the first four institutions which were visited had been published.

The University of Pretoria's Audit Report is illustrative of the care taken by the QPU not to be prescriptive, but to identify areas which require attention in a non-judgemental way. For example, in remarking on the University's notion of excellence, the Audit Panel suggests that, while excellence "is an important component of quality", the "academic staff could work towards reconciling the concepts of excellence and of development in the university" (QPU 1998c: 8). Unfortunately, what the QPU means by this recommendation is not clear. Is the QPU saying that the University's notion of excellence is incompatible with its growing African student body and that the academic staff need to confront this reality? One is left with the conclusion that the QPU is trying too hard to be collegial. Even the comment that is it "not wholly appropriate" for concerns about quality to be driven by

financial considerations could be strengthened. The QPU's comments on this particular matter highlight one shortcoming of the audit reports: that the recommendations "should be specific and operational" if they are to lead to the desired results (QPU Management Board 1998a:10). In the same assessment of the QPU's audit of the University of Zululand, Boughey makes that point that, while the ensuing report might not have much 'clout' because of the emphasis on the 'enabling', 'developmental' and 'supporting' nature of the process

> it is nevertheless something which may or may not be given high profile or status (depending on the strategy adopted by an individual institution). It therefore behoves the panel to report on their findings as faithfully as possible, giving explicit contextual detail and qualification to any opinions formed and pronouncements made. (QPU Management Board 1998a:11)

With respect to the actual audit, the QPU itself is alert to the potential pitfalls of a non-punitive, collegial quality assurance exercise. After the 'pilot' audits, the QPU emphasized the importance of "a professional approach to the audit": members of the audit panel had to guard against informality so that a 'buddy system' did not develop which could compromise the integrity of the audit (QPU Management Board 1998b:2). Other recommendations relate to being aware of attempts at 'window-dressing': audit panels are encouraged to seek out "people who can make a contribution to the discussions and not only to represent as many interests as possible" and to avoid interviewing "the same person/people over and over again–every time just 'wearing a different hat'" (ibid.:3). This may, however, be difficult to achieve and would require audit panels to insist on a suitable range of interviewees in its negotiations with institutions prior to the visit.

5.5 The Future of the QPU

The QPU will eventually become subsumed in the Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council on Higher Education which, in terms of the Higher Education Act (101 of 1997), will be responsible for quality assurance and accreditation for institutions which fall within the higher education sector, namely universities and technikons (the HEQC will fulfil the statutory function of an Education and Training Quality Assurance Body (ETQA) in the SAQA framework).

As a result of this development SERTEC (the Certification Council for Technikon Education) will also fall away. The NCHE envisaged that SERTEC would form the core of the HEQC and would play an important role in the development of procedures for programme accreditation in view of its expertise in this area. The QPU, on the other hand, could fulfill quality promotion and related "developmental and capacity-building functions" (NCHE 1996:110). However, programme accreditation in the technikon sector is essentially a system of accreditation prescribing minimum standards for all technikon programmes (SERTEC 1996). There has been some concern about SERTEC's lack of experience in respect of quality audits (and its "mechanistic" approach to quality assessment) and the technikons would have to become acquainted with this approach (QPU 1996, Gevers 1998c). It will be necessary to balance the complementary expertise of the QPU and SERTEC to the benefit of both components of the higher education sector. There are, however, likely to be tensions, as the universities have deliberately avoided a 'minimum standards' approach to quality improvement (Gevers 1998b). This matter will be addressed soon as the Council on Higher Education has begun the process of establishing the HEQC.

6. Conclusion

Gevers (1998c) concedes that quality improvement as pursued by the QPU is a long-term process, but he does not believe that, in the short-term, the state can "just throw money at a problem" as it could lead to "a redress-induced disaster". Notwithstanding these comments, he emphasizes the need to support the HDIs, who, he says, have decided that they wish to "survive" [as universities, despite the challenges which they face]. Which explains the QPU's emphasis on quality improvement which is institution-centered as opposed to a system which assesses, compares and ranks institutions. Given the unique characteristics of the South African system, particularly its history of inequality and inter-institutional tension, the QPU has wisely chosen an approach which is likely to elicit co-operation and compliance from all universities.

Bunting (1998) has made the point that the QPU has not developed out of an an "evaluative culture", as opposed to what has happened in countries like France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom where higher education has traditionally been

subject to tight state control. Nevertheless, professional boards have always played a quality assurance role (albeit limited) with respect to the professional disciplines in South African universities. Furthermore, peer review in the form of external examining has also been used by some universities for the purposes of quality assurance. Thus the idea of assuring the quality of educational offerings is not new to South African universities. The QPU does, however, move a step further along the quality assurance continuum and takes South Africa into the company of countries which have adopted formal,system-wide quality assurance. This is essential for international recognition of qualifications obtained in South African universities.

The architects of the QPU have been concerned chiefly with designing a mechanism which would establish and foster a culture of quality in South African universities. International examples have been shaped to meet South Africa's unique needs: no ranking and certainly not funding tied to ranking; an emphasis on 'quality improvement'; self-assessment followed by external audit to lay the foundations of an 'evaluative culture'. In doing so, the QPU seeks to avoid the pitfalls and problems associated with the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education. These issues will be discussed more fully in the final chapter which will also look at lessons which South Africans should take from the experiences of other countries.

CHAPTER FOUR : CONCLUSION

This study has looked at the context in which concern around quality arises in higher education and the manner in which measuring quality has been operationalised, i.e., the methods and mechanisms of quality assurance which have been developed to assess and demonstrate the quality of higher education. The merits of selected methods of quality assurance have been discussed and examples of mechanisms used in two countries, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, have been explained briefly. Furthermore, the international dimension of quality assurance in higher education as an outcome of globalization has been noted. Against this background, the study has briefly explored the particular characteristics of higher education in South Africa and the context in which quality assurance is being addressed, namely, a context in which redress and development play an important role.

Having sketched the major themes in the study, it is helpful to reflect on what has been learnt about (a) contestation around the definitions of quality, (b) international experience with respect to methods and mechanisms of quality assurance, (c) the first round of institutional audits conducted by the Quality Promotion Unit, and (d) lessons which South African universities can take into the future. The following comments are not meant to repeat, but rather to supplement, what has been said earlier in this study.

1. Competing notions of quality

The literature shows that quality as it is conceived of by the academic community is often at odds with conceptions of quality which originate outside of higher education, for example in the marketplace or in the state. The former tends to be 'communicative' whereas the latter has been described as being 'instrumental' (see Barnett 1992). These competing notions are also a reflection of different philosophical approaches with respect to the purposes of higher education and how its quality should be assessed and improved. As a consequence, quality assurance methods and mechanisms are shaped by the extent to which either notion as the

greatest amount of influence in a given system and quality assurance continues to be a site of contestation.

2. International Experience

In his provocative paper on the impact of quality assurance on the university system, Collison (1998:1) asserts that quality assurance in the United Kingdom "has been bad for Education (sic)" mainly for the following reasons: its mechanisms are overly bureaucratic and burdensome and because it "presupposes that quality can be defined and reduced to quantifiable data". With respect to the latter point, he adds that quality assurance mechanisms often highlight aspects of the educational experience which can be quantified and pay no attention to unquantifiable aspects; often it is the latter which are more important than the former. Collison observes further that quality assurance is more concerned with process than with results and that it is the process (of assuring quality) which is so time-consuming (ibid). By emphasizing the necessity of adherence to procedures, quality assurance leaves little room for innovation and, more importantly, it fails to meet the needs of its 'customers' (ibid:4).

Others offer a more fundamental criticism: Baldwin (1994) takes issue with the notion of the "student as customer" which characterizes quality assurance methods borrowed from industry and business. In fact, she is concerned that universities are being colonized and that this "process ... may bring with it all of the destructiveness of any colonizing movement–a wholesale usurpation of customs, structures, values and perceptions" (ibid:131). Two culprits (incidently also examples cited by Baldwin) spring to mind immediately: Total Quality Management and Continuous (Quality) Improvement; proponents of these approaches tend to be scornful of what some consider to be the unique characteristics of universities (see Lewis and Smith 1994, Dennis 1995).

Baldwin's advice to universities is that "a defensive rear-guard action is not enough" to ward off colonization "by alien cultures" (ibid:137). Rather, systems of evaluation which have always been used in universities can be utilized for quality improvement and quality assurance. For example, *academic review* is a long-established and

respected process rooted in university culture which entails expert judgement based on knowledge in a given field. Baldwin concedes that "the processes of review need to be made more rigorous and systematic: undoubtedly in some areas peer review has been too cosy and complacent" (ibid:138). But she believes that academic staff are far more likely to embrace procedures which are not "antithetical to the purposes and cultures of the institutions" (ibid:137). Such procedures are also more likely to achieve the desired aims of improving and assuring quality of programmes and institutions.

3. Quality Assurance in South Africa

Because South Africa is just beginning to implement formal system-wide quality assurance in higher education and because of the unique characteristics of its system, particularly the legacy of inequality among universities, Gevers (1997) has noted that what is required is "a strongly developmental use of instruments which have been used in other countries". Details of how the Quality Promotion Unit will function have been described in the previous chapter. South Africans have been careful to design a system which involves "relatively few resources, has a short lead time, and gives beneficial outcomes immediately" (Gevers 1997). However, in feedback to the QPU after its (pilot) audit, the University of Port Elizabeth drew attention to "a serious lack of capacity in the QPU" which it believed should be addressed "as a matter of urgency"; the university had been audited in April 1997 and, by July, had not yet received the audit panel's draft report (CUP 1997). (The QPU had intended to produce draft reports within a month of an audit.) The QPU is clearly trying to avoid creating a huge bureaucracy. However, under-capacity could undermine the very process it is trying hard to establish (ibid).

Despite these criticisms, the institution's experience of self-evaluation is an important educational aspect of the whole process. This point was made by UPE and Rhodes University in feedback on the pilot audits and in Boughey's detailed case study of the University of Zululand's audit experience (CUP 1997, QPU Management Board 1998a).

However, in Chapter Two the dilemma of quality audit was highlighted, namely that it "carries no direct penalty or reward. It has no means of forcing compliance with the findings of its teams, or even that audit reports be read and inwardly digested" (Webb 1994:59). Although Gevers (1997) is confident that "institutional audits [can] have a powerful effect on the understanding of internal players of what is really meant by effective internal QA", in order to translate understanding into action, it may be advisable to require institutions to report, one year after the audit, on what action has been taken to address shortcomings highlighted by the visiting team. This practice was adopted by the Division of Quality Audit of the United Kingdom's Higher Education Quality Council.

4. The Merits of the QPU's approach to Quality Assurance

As noted earlier in this Chapter, a major weakness with the QPU's approach is the lack of sanction. However, this could also be its greatest strength. In fact, in feedback to the QPU on its experience of the pilot audit, Rhodes University observed

> much of our progress was made possible by honest answers and perhaps this could be encouraged by *reassuring institutions that the emphasis is on quality promotion and that punitive action will not result from these audits* (CUP 1997).

Boughey notes, on the other hand, that "money talks" (QPU Management Board 1998a:15). The problem is that it encourages compliant behaviour. This is a recurrent concern in systems of quality assurance which are linked to funding.

The QPU has wisely taken a non-punitive approach to quality assessment and has emphasized quality improvement. By doing so, it has side-stepped the thorny issue of whether some universities in the system deserve the title. Bunting (1998) has noted that the relativist notion of quality as 'fitness for purpose' can be taken too far [and asserted in the absence of a prior discussion about the purposes of universities, as opposed to other forms of higher education]. The purpose of an institution still has to be aligned with the key qualities of a university or it will no longer function as a university. The QPU's approach obviates that discussion. Rather its special brand of quality promotion seeks to improve institutions without debating their bona fides as universities. The QPU judges universities against their own objectives and not against

each other. Ultimately it should have a unifying effect on a disparate system in a field which is still fraught with undercurrents.

The QPU had few options:

- Preserving the status quo, i.e., no system of quality assurance, would send a signal to the international higher education community that South Africa is opting out of a global movement. South African university programmes would have difficulty obtaining accreditation from a growing number of international accreditation agencies;
- A quality assurance system tied to funding would stir up enmity between instutions and would perpetuate current equalities;
- A system in which institutions are ranked would have had the same effect. Kells (1998) is critical of this approach which he calls "change by embarrassment".

The last two options would encourage competition between universities and would act against planning a unified, coherent system; something which is enshrined in the Higher Education Act , 101 of 1997 (Section 2(f) refers to the development of "*the* national higher education plan).

5. Evaluating the evaluators

The current system in South Africa has not made provision for meta-evaluation, that is, evaluation of the evaluators, although Gevers comments that an international granting agency has agreed to provide the resources for evaluating the QPU's audits once they have all been completed. This is not the same as establishing a structure for this purpose as in the case of the Netherlands (Vroeijenstein 1992). Universities in South Africa are not in the position of UK universities "which have no right of appeal against the judgements of the inspectorate team" (AUA News Bulletin-76). At this stage, audits are not tied to funding or ranking, nor are the QPU's audit reports likely to damage institutional reputations. However, there is merit in subjecting the QPU "to regular review by outside experts" to ensure that the system is consistent with (desirable) international practice and consequently will "have a positive effect on higher education in South Africa" (ibid., CUP 1997).

6. Concluding remarks

The advent of quality assurance has evoked fears that it will change the university fundamentally and inflict irreparable damage on its basic values. The biggest threat is perceived to be to university autonomy, in particular, the rights of academics to determine "academic standards, the academic acceptability of courses, and the quality of research output": in other words, core aspects of a university's existence (Doherty 1997:17). Undoubtedly, universities are undergoing profound changes as a result of the implementation of quality assurance systems. In order to meet demands for accountability, mechanisms have been developed which entail a level of scrutiny which academics have not experienced before. Quality assurance has brought with it a managerial culture to higher education which is incompatible with collegiality, previously a core aspect of university life. We would do well to remember, however, that "[o]ver the centuries the university has proved its resilience as an institution" (OECD 1987). This is another period of fundamental change for universities world-wide. They are unlikely to survive in the same form, but they are more than likely to survive.

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